

PAINTED PONIES:  
ESSAYS ON MEMORY AND LOSS

BY

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## Painted Ponies

And the seasons they go round and round.  
And the painted ponies go up and down.  
We're captive on the carousel of time.  
We can't return we can only look  
Behind from where we came,  
And go round and round and round  
In the circle game.

Joni Mitchell  
"The Circle Game"

Time has always appeared to me, in my mind's eye, as a spiral, a series of near-repetitions, reminders of the past, revisits to acts undone or overwrought. Each moment brings a different perspective on familiar experiences in an unfamiliar context. No event in my life can be relived, but previous events often seem to be reconstructed so that I understand them differently. My father died of a rare brain disease, and I watched my mother live with the uncertainty of his illness, dreading her own life after his death, experiencing her mother's death during that period of uncertainty. Forty years later I watched my own husband die of a different rare brain disease, soon after my mother's death. As I went through these losses, I remembered familiar past experiences, given the chance to see anew, to understand perhaps through the lens of age. I revisit my past as if it were an old book, rereading the pages for what I understood differently the first time through, sometimes hardly remembering the text at all. Something happens in my life now that italicizes something years ago, brings it into my immediate memory, and informs my life as I

live it. Each new day starts with memory of the day before as much as with anticipation of the day to come.

My preoccupation with memory has profoundly affected my own taste in reading and writing. Much of my life I have been torn between image and text, finally choosing words as closer to my own way of remembering, though my words are always tinged by a visual sensibility. I think in patterns first, then words, be they patterns of color or design or patterns I recognize in the narrative of my experience. I had a friend in college who was a synesthete – she saw specific colors when she heard musical notes. She was an accomplished pianist who grew exhausted after playing a long time or attending a concert. My perception is not so precise, but it is certainly fraught with the need to find patterns and connections in whatever I do. After taking a series of tests when I was in junior high, I was asked to take more tests on pattern-recognition. I took these tests annually for several years, and never understood why others didn't recognize the sequences that I identified. I realized pretty quickly that I wasn't as interested in abstract mathematical patterns as I was in patterns that were not so apparent, not so easily available. I preferred sensing the patterns, and recognizing vague connections amid the chaos.

Virginia Woolf, in "A Sketch of the Past," refers to her own behavior as her intuition: "It is so instinctive that it seems given me not made by me – [it] has certainly given its scale to my life. . . . If I were painting myself I should have to find some – rod, shall I say – something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living

all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool.” Be it intuition or habit of mind, I have found, first through poetry, and then through the essay or, more specifically, the memoir, the way to express my recognition of the pattern behind the cotton wool. As a reader, I savor the creative patterns of novelists who construct beautiful narratives on which to hang characters and actions, all wrought with interactive meaning. But my own intellectual path has drawn me to recognize and identify the patterns I encounter, and to construct series of patterns out of my own experience. Sometimes my life seems absurdly coincidental in its propensity for pattern-making. Either I keep repeating myself or repetition thrusts itself upon me. But I also notice patterns in everyone else’s lives, often using my own penchant for connections as a vehicle, not only for writing, but also for teaching or interacting with others. It is much easier to form and maintain relationships based on interrelated experiences. Patterns call attention to our interconnectedness.

When every part of one’s life seems a dot-to-dot book, it is difficult to decide which dots are worth connecting in a formal way, which events resonate enough to warrant writing and what kind of writing best illuminates the patterns. Poetry for me captures momentary connections, observations that connect oh so tenuously at times, language that reverberated briefly and intensely in my experience. Poetry provides metaphors through which I examine experience, even when the poetry is not my own. Many of my own memories hang on the poetry of others. I read Yeats’s “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” with my husband Tom, long before he lost his own ability to



remember. We lingered over the lines, “Man is in love and loves what vanishes. What more is there to say?” Those prescient words have become the metaphor for that loss in my life. Dickinson’s poem “The last night she lived” focuses on how common the night is, “except the dying,” of her loved one in the next room. This picture of death seems truer than anything I have been able to express myself about the final moments in life.

Whether in poetry or fiction or the essay, I find myself drawn to fragments, to narratives that either focus on a moment or gather moments together. I have never been fond of too much explanation. The poems in this collection often refer to specific memories, but they are trying not to recollect or narrate but rather to explore. These poems are often tangential to the essays, offering another way of seeing the events that form my memories. The essays are sometimes autobiographical travelogues, in which I explore the memories that flood my mind. I try to record the moments that seem most meaningful to me, that reveal the patterns I have discerned. Other essays live entirely in my own mind, interpretations of other people’s experiences and motivations, their lives made vivid in my own attempts to explore their narratives. Those essays seem as significant to my exploration of my past as the ones in which I delineate my own experiences. They are part of the world I see behind me, that I carry with me. I can understand and interpret my own past only in relation to the pasts of others I have encountered. While many of my essays take me to faraway places and faraway times, what resonates for me as a writer is that each experience I try to narrate seems contemporary as I try to write it. Writing is not so

much a trip down memory lane as an attempt once more to feel an experience and sense its connection to the rest of my life. Once I revisit those feelings, those thoughts, those memories, my sense of the world expands beyond my current experience. I am better able to situate myself in a larger context, more capable of understanding conditions and ideas different from my own.

Because the past is so resonant in my daily life, I don't dread the future. I simply ruminate on the past as I take my steps forward, knowing that both parts of my life change as I reflect. My present situation changes how I perceive my past; my present grows richer by knowing how I arrived at the moment I am living. This remembering is a way of life. I think first of where I am, of what or who is around me. I pet the cats, check to see that I turned on the coffee, and sink myself into morning meditation, melding past with present, using remembering as an exercise in understanding. I am painfully aware of change and its effects, of the loss of possibility and the transformative power of history. But I also know that understanding my experience gives meaning to my days, and disconnecting them from the past seems, if not foolish, at least negligent. I can't return, I can only look . . . as I ride the painted ponies on my carousel of time. But looking brings solace and connection, and I cherish the gift of memory no matter what the cost.

## The Circles

Around and  
around  
spinning  
I did  
the circles  
to get dizzy  
to get dizzy  
to get dizzy.

The trick  
was to stay  
standing.  
I rubbed  
my fists  
into my eyes  
while I kept  
spinning, spinning.  
I made  
visions dark  
with sparkles  
first, then swirls  
black and white,  
then color,  
not clear  
colors but  
hints  
in the swirls.

And I kept  
standing.  
If I fell  
it was over.  
I had lost.

I never  
told anyone  
I made the circles,  
rubbed my eyes,

but once  
Mrs. Stewart,  
a teacher,  
told us  
rubbing  
your eyes  
hard  
would ruin  
your eyes, even  
damage your brain.

Still  
I made  
the circles,  
my fists in  
my eyes.  
In eighth grade  
I got glasses,  
probably,  
the doctor said,  
because I fell  
as a child.

Or it was  
the rubbing,  
but I didn't  
tell him  
about the rubbing.

## Negotiating Oz

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Bluebirds fly  
Birds fly over the rainbow  
Why then, oh why can't I?  
Some day I'll wish upon a star  
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me . . .

I grew up visiting Oz. The summer before my fourth birthday, my brother John broke his arm playing baseball. Forced to stay inside all day, he was bored. Our family had recently obtained two rejected, old-fashioned student desks from our elementary school. John pushed the desks together classroom-style and proceeded to teach me how to read. I had already dabbled in deciphering the stacks of newspapers that littered our kitchen table, the shelves of books in nearly every room in our house. Born eight and eleven years before me, my two brothers were ready for me to be self-sufficient. I was equally ready. So John made a visual phonetic chart, matching sounds with colorful drawings that coincided with my way of learning so completely, I was reading the primers we had also obtained from the school in a week. There was no Dick and Jane, but the small red volumes contained equivalent stories and equally monosyllabic names. I too became bored with the monotony of the sterile and repetitive language and so began my Oz odyssey.

Oz stories seemed my destiny. My mother's name was Dorothy. She was from Kansas. She actually had an Auntie Em. I had a black cocker spaniel – not Toto, but close enough. I immediately entered the imaginary world of Oz and,

henceforth, the world of reading, a transportation that marks those of us I refer to as “cereal box readers.” Put words in front of us and we will read them. *Minimum daily requirements. Dillards January White Sale. “Do not remove this tag under penalty of law.”* I did that once, removed the tag from my pillow, and feared dire consequences when I heard a siren the moment I had ripped it from the striped ticking. Of course, the police were off to penalize more serious infractions. Still, I have never removed a pillow tag since. But *The Wizard of Oz* took me beyond decoding and deciphering, understanding connections between letters and words and objects and people. It created a world that I wanted to revisit through all fifteen books in the series. I didn’t want to come down to dinner, to go outside and run through the sprinklers, to join the kids as they gallivanted through the neighborhood. I preferred communing with the world in the book to the one I inhabited. And Oz gave me a view of the world that I still negotiate.

The original book, which sits in my study to this day, was a second edition. Large and green with frayed edges, my mother had picked it up from a sale. She bought it for my brothers and I do believe they read it (One of my brothers occasionally asks to be its keeper but I refuse to let it go.). The pictures are inky and intense, smudged woodcut impressions. The image of the tornado is solid and intimidating, a full page big. Growing up in northeastern Oklahoma, I had a real fear of tornados for a time but the possibility of Oz as a payoff increased my interest in the dark skies I viewed out our kitchen window. These books came so early in my consciousness that I don’t remember if I related to Dorothy or not. I can’t recall such

a conscious reaction. For most of my childhood and adolescence, the books I read involved boy protagonists, were written by men. I forced myself to transform into characters of all shapes and sizes, genders and races. Sometimes that was the lure, to become something other than myself. But perhaps Dorothy was close enough to my real identity that she lured me subconsciously. Her journey into danger, her encounter with the Scarecrow (my favorite), the Tin Woodsman, the Lion enabled me, the lone small child in my house, to claim vicarious friendships. Those friendships were immediately more interesting, more invigorating than my occasional neighborhood relationships. Not much for “kick the can” or “grey ghost”, I found the yellow brick road more appealing than the adventures of Peggy, the girl down the street, who wanted to play horses. Playing horses meant holding our hands up close to our faces, pointing our fingers out in front of us, and galloping around the neighborhood. I refused to neigh.

After I finished reading *The Wizard of Oz* enough times that I bored my mother with the highlights, someone – I have no memory of who – took me to the library to check out the other books in the series. We would get them four or five at a time and I would lie upstairs on my mother’s bed and read all afternoon. It was a shady room, cooler than the rest of the house. I would wad myself up in the cool sheets and read until dinner or until I ran out of book. I don’t remember much about the sequels. I mostly remember that their existence made Dorothy’s trip to Oz real for me. It wasn’t a dream that awakened her to her Kansas home but a real journey that called her to return. Oz was a place that enabled her to escape the drab rules of

Kansas. I liked being able to return to Oz as if Oz were happening all along, even when I wasn't reading about it. I still have that feeling about some books. I sometimes teach *Middlemarch* in my British literature classes and have conversations with students after they have finally finished the book. They too imagine the town's existence, Dorothea's continuing charities, the complications of church and town, continuing on, not into the 20<sup>th</sup> century but like a timeless Brigadoon. I'm sure avid readers of Tolkien and Rowling feel the same draw to other worlds. Not all books affect me that way. More often books entice me to think about now, about my own real life, about issues and ideas, political and philosophical concepts. I read to think. I like both ways of reading, thrilled when the two interact as I read a powerful novel that illuminates some piece of the world or a poem that, as Dickinson said, "makes me feel as if the top of my head has been taken off." I am very particular about the books that transport me. I often wander off the path of purely escapist fiction, more fascinated with my own conjecture. To the contrary, my mother would read anything that transported her out of her disappointments. I wanted to go to far off places; she wanted to go to far past times, imagining that history would remove the current dilemmas she faced.

I found meaning as well as escape in the Oz books. I constructed my own images, occasionally drew pictures of the characters, once even imagined my own sequel but really never had anything new to add, just variations on a theme. Because I read the Oz books when I was so young, I began to claim them as if they were my stories, my special books. I would tell people about the characters as if I really knew



them. I still maintain a proprietary claim. My feelings of ownership became resolute when, in 1956, after I had started school and had read many other books including a large pile of science books about bugs, my family's way to dispel my fear of insects (It worked, by the way), the 1939 movie of *The Wizard of Oz* was broadcast on evening television. While that seems mundane now, it was a big event in 1956. I had never seen the movie. Reruns weren't frequent at the downtown theatres. Local television stations in Oklahoma were just beginning to run old movies after the late news. But CBS advertised this broadcast as a groundbreaking event. Our whole family gathered in front of our lone RCA Victor console to watch. My mother had seen the movie when it was new. She remembered it vividly. She claimed the movie the way I claimed the books. It was one of her three favorites: *Gone with the Wind*, *Song of the South*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. I lay on the floor, leaning on my elbows, far too close to the screen as I always did, and watched black and white Kansas become black and white Oz. We didn't have a color television. No one in our neighborhood did for a couple more years. The Boatrights finally bought one in 1958 so they could fully appreciate the scenery on *Bonanza* and their daughter Linda could go gaga over Little Joe. But in 1956, the great gimmick of the movie was lost on our small screen. There was no brilliant Technicolor transformation after Dorothy landed on the witch. Oz was just as gray as Kansas. Still, the movie resonated with me. It was energetic and different from my own imagination. The munchkins sang in their helium voices. Dorothy seemed giant, nearly a grown-up. Billie Burke was just a little too sweet as Glinda. I didn't trust that sort of saccharine generosity, even then.

The wicked witch was much more comfortably evil. I fell in love with Dorothy's cohorts. The Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, the Lion, all melded with my own imagination and took their places in my narrative. Their transformation was so complete that I have no memory at all of what they were like in the text. Their gentle buffoonery won me completely. And the music gave me a soundtrack for my imagination, an effect that permeates all of us now in an age of cinema. I like all the wonderful Harold Arlen songs, even in the munchkin voices, but "Over the Rainbow" answered my own desire for something bigger than my life. By the time I saw the movie, my father was ill. He watched the movie that night from his big chair in the corner of the living room as he nursed the horrible headaches that filled his days. I longed to go the way of the bluebirds. So despite a few disappointments, I immersed myself in the movie, frightened by the horrible monkeys, triumphant and satisfied at the melting of the wicked witch, and especially fond of Frank Morgan's Wizard, a much more complex character than the "little man with the trembling voice" in the book. He was benevolently disappointing in an adult-sort of way. Wizardry was ultimately just nice words from a nice man. But the one thing I could not handle was the ending. The final chapter in the book is short, a few lines. Auntie Em is watering the cabbages as Dorothy and Toto return home. "Where in the world did you come from?" Auntie Em asks, as if life had gone on so easily. "From the Land of Oz," says Dorothy. She is glad to be home but she has actually gone to Oz. The movie, on the other hand, dismisses the journey. The story ends with Dorothy in her bed, surrounded by family and friends. Dorothy had fallen and bumped her head and

dreamed the whole thing. No Oz. Just a vivid childish imagination. Her companions on the yellow brick road were the farmhands, easily identifiable despite their overalls. Just clever casting to prove that she had dreamed the whole thing. Nothing about Oz was real. Like some cheap junior high short story ending, Dorothy just woke up and the story avoided the difficulty of explaining an alternative land.

I don't want to wake up when I enter a transformative world, be it a book, a journey, or simple reverie, and regard my experience as artificial. The worlds I find in books or in my travels or in my imagination are real. They are my means of exploration. Oz began that exploration for me. Perhaps that is why I like to travel, why in recent years I have begun to take college students abroad. They are all nascent Dorothy's finding their own Oz landscapes. And the best thing about it is that even when I return to Oz, like Dorothy, new characters appear – students, museum-goers, shop clerks, passers-by.

One thing the movie gave me that wasn't in the book was the character of the Professor Marvel, a ne'er-do-well carnival operator Dorothy meets when she is searching for Toto. Played by Frank Morgan, who doubled as Dorothy's Wizard in Oz, he was both confidante and advisor even before he became the Wizard. Long past his prime as a svengali, he was all the more charismatic to me because of his own air of disappointment. As the Wizard he was equally uncomfortable in his role. Unlike the "trembling" Wizard in the book, he was confused, embarrassed, but fully aware of his deception. Still he was the transporter, the problem-solver, the one who

held the keys, even when he had no idea what the keys opened or closed. Dorothy was enabled by his truthful con.

As with most of the books I read or movies I watch, I realize that my vantage point changes as I age. I teach books in which I have been the age of all the characters over the years. As my identity changes, so does my understanding of the book. A character that seemed exciting and daring in my youth, seems silly and impetuous now. Sometimes things just get more and more complicated as I understand how hard it is to be anyone, even a character in a novel. Perhaps, I have forsaken Dorothy, in my old age, and am negotiating Oz now, in my older self, as Professor Marvel, faux Wizard, as I travel the world with eager and frightened Dorothy's and Scarecrows and Lions – Dorothy's who are bored with their lives here in Kansas, Dorothy's who travel to save Totos in all sorts of places from all sorts of dangers. Lions and Woodsmen and Scarecrows all seek their identities within by wandering without, exploring foreign cities and exotic rainforests just to have a chance to see anew. I witness these journeys often and each time I grow a little myself.

But I am Professor Marvel, the hapless Wizard, in more ways than that. I am more lost than knowledgeable. And I hold onto the irrational and inspiring belief that there is someplace to fly to where the clouds are far behind me. I still imagine that, despite all the common sense in the world, I'll be able to click the heels of my red slippers, or find a hot air balloon that travels magically and immediately to solace and assurance. People who know me would doubt this sentimental optimism. I profess

an ironic disposition and crack jokes in the midst of touching movies, even when I secretly wipe tears from my eyes, under the cover of allergies. But I long for the comfort of good travel companions, the fascination of transparently evil witches and the deep regenerating sleep available in Oz's poppy fields. I hunger for the triumph of goodness, however we can construct it. Meaningful travel, whether to other countries or through ordinary days, demands some fairy dusting. Professor Marvel and the Wizard knew that, and even Dorothy learned that. As the movie ended, she might have announced with some conviction that there is no place like home, but my Dorothy is still traveling with the bluebirds back to "the Land of Oz."

## All The Way Down

I spent most of my childhood sitting in hospital lobbies. They replaced living rooms and classrooms and dance studios for me. I went there to wait for my dad to get well or to die. The youngest of three children, I was relegated to wait. I read hundreds of books, filled dozens and dozens of drawing pads and learned to live in my head as a desirable alternative to bad conversation and boredom. Each hospital had a special quality. One was ultra-modern and I pretended I was living in the future; another was run by Catholic sisters and I gave my soul to God every Saturday afternoon, anticipating grand changes to my life. The one where my father died was a dull room, badly in need of redecoration. The floor was covered with large green and tan linoleum tiles. There were small couches and chairs shoved against the walls, when families hadn't rearranged them to facilitate conversations. Most of the time, I was the only person in the lobby. I often forgot that I wasn't at home as I settled into myself and, more particularly, into my head. I took a recurring journey as I slouched down into the green vinyl couch. I would stretch my legs out toward the middle of the waiting room, my big toe reaching for the middle, green square. I would grasp the metal arms extending from the matching green arm rests, little oblong pillows balancing themselves on the metal bars, and lift myself carefully out far enough to touch the absolute center of the tile. I aimed for a particular mark on the one green tile surrounded by squares of tan, then green, then tan, making a target of tiles. The old chipped linoleum, transformed the floor into a whirlpool that pulled me into its

tow. I thought, if I touched the center of that one green tile in just the right spot, at just the right time, I might drop through the floor, down, down, thrust through space to some alien land. I would be greeted by creatures I could never imagine. I tried to imagine them, sometimes gray spirits, or bright blue and red giants, or invisible except for eyes or mouths, but I understood that anything I could think of would be wrong, a product of my own boring mind or of stories I had heard from my brothers, who conjured up ghosts and goblins to keep me from sleeping. The real creatures would be something I could never think of, a delicious surprise I had never read about or seen on television. These creatures would be smarter, wiser, nicer than humans. They would teach me how to see the future, how to travel to the past, how to read the minds of humans. After years of lessons (I imagined I would be the best human they had ever taught), they would send me back to earth. I would come back to that very spot, through the very tile in the middle of this boring lobby. I would still be only ten, still be in this hospital, waiting, watching, but it would be different. I would sit on the couch with my book, pretending to read the words, but all the time I would be penetrating the minds of the nurses, the other visitors that got candy out of the machine next to the couch, the receptionist behind the desk who smiled carelessly at everyone who walked by, even if they didn't look at her. But most of all I would sit by my father and read behind his eyes, find out what it felt like not to speak, what he meant when he looked at me, when he pulled on my hand. I would find out if he knew he was dying, if he were afraid, if it were okay. I would sit there all day and night watching and listening.

My dad was sick for six years, battling a disease no doctors could identify. He was just sick. We didn't have names like cancer or cardiac disease. He had passed out at my brother's baseball practice and we spent the next six years figuring out why. We visited area doctors. They guessed at all sorts of diagnoses. Tried medicines and treatments as they became available or fashionable. Some of the medicines helped a little. Some of them made him angry or sleepy or tense. Then we went to new doctors who guessed again. My dad spent a year in the Oklahoma State Mental Hospital in Vinita reorganizing their finances as a kind of therapy. He was an accountant when his headaches didn't stop him from thinking. He had collapsed on the ball field when I was four. He had pulled himself up off the field and driven home, then staggered helplessly into the house. I was sprawled on the floor scribbling, when I looked up to see him stumble against the floral walls. I hardly remember him from before that. I was only four. I recall snatches of time, walking together, sitting on his lap, playing with the dog while he played his harmonica. But I always felt special with him, ran eagerly to meet him when he returned from work. I remember that. Some years before he had given up drinking, a condition my mother had insisted on, for having another child. I was that child. And after the day when my dad collapsed, I locked my sense of favor inside myself and preserved it for the lonely times to come.

My mother was as consumed with his illness as he was. She was exhausted all the time, not from work as much as from worry. Trained to be a wife and mother, she was overwhelmed by the illness and afraid of his death, afraid of what she would



be left with and left without. Like my dad, she was angry at what she couldn't understand. By the time we found out what he had, the name of the illness, it was too late. Arachnoiditis: A rare disease. Only 12 cases before my father according to medical records. I learned the origin of the word: Greek. Spider in the brain. One of the brain's linings, the web-like arachnoid mater, dries out and squeezes the brain, causes intolerable headaches. The doctors still didn't know what caused it but they had a name. We have found out since that the disease was caused by the dye test my father took after he collapsed on the ball field. A reaction to the iodine. An ironic conclusion. We have no idea what caused him to collapse that day. Maybe a stroke. But it helped us to have a name, even when it was too late to save him. We were relieved it was not the mental illness everyone surmised, that people in the fifties were ashamed of. The headaches were real. We all felt better that the headaches were real. A clinical diagnosis made his pain somehow more sympathetic. My fourth grade teacher's husband had headaches they could not name. The doctors gave him a lobotomy. He wandered through town blissfully and unaware. My dad said he would rather be dead.

I was in fifth grade when the doctors finally performed the surgery. It was the week of Thanksgiving. That Wednesday the surgeon had to drill burr holes in his skull to relieve the pressure. My brother explained to me the procedure. Some days I still think of the drill, his head, the pain he must have felt. I still glance away from the mental image, close my internal eyes and cringe. We were hopeful for a while after the surgery. There were signs of a cure. He engaged in conversation, made

jokes, recaptured his droll demeanor. He even came home for Christmas and held my baby niece on his chest. We pretended our lives had returned to normal. That he would go back to work. That we would take vacations and fix up the house and have regular dinners. Then one day he got up off the bed, like a normal person, and collapsed, like the shunt in his brain. An ambulance took him back to the hospital in Tulsa. After a few weeks it became evident. The doctors had given up on him. Doctors don't like that phase, the giving up. It's like failure. They sent him home to Bartlesville to die. "We'll just have to wait," as if the end were ambiguous. "We don't know how long he will last, but it's just a matter of time. You might as well take him home so it's more convenient for you. The girl needs to be in school." I was the girl. I didn't go to school much that year. I did fine anyway. I was what they call "a reader." The teachers sent weekly homework. I read books. I became comfortable in hospital lobbies. The doctors didn't let me go to that meeting, the one where they gave up. But I heard the words again and again as mom told the relatives over the phone. Before we left the hospital, I did get one of the doctors to show me the x-rays of my dad's skull, the deformity, how his brain was being squeezed and cramped. At night I would close my eyes and see the gray and black and white image. Sometimes I would see everyone that way, like photo negatives walking around, imagining the deformities in their brains or lungs or feet, the secret diseases that would end their lives. "It's just a matter of time," I would think.

So he came home to Bartlesville and was placed in a ward for four people. We had no money for private rooms or special care. Usually the beds weren't full.

Dad was in a corner bed by a window. That corner became our living room for four months. I would walk from my school to my mom's retail job downtown. Experienced at boredom, I would wait, imagine, window shop until she was off work. We would walk to the hospital. My mother had never learned to drive and the section of town we needed to navigate was small enough to travel on foot. Within a few weeks my father stopped talking, so we talked to him. Mostly my mother talked to him, to the nurses, to the various other patients and their visitors. My brother who lived in town visited most days. He worked, had a child, was overwhelmed by his own life. Death and young marriage are uncomfortable bedfellows. My other brother was at college fulfilling my parents' dream. So mom and I made our dysfunctional world perfectly functional. Usually we would break for dinner, go to the steakhouse next door. I played the jukebox and ate hamburgers. Except for the fact that my father was dying, those evenings were fun, tasty, extravagant. We knew all the waitresses. They would jimmy the nickelodeon so I didn't have to pay. I filled the restaurant with the sounds of Del Shannon and The Shirrelles singing "Runaway" and "Mama Said." Sometimes my mom sang along; she always booth-danced, moving her shoulders to the music, forgetting what burdened her across the street. We would return to the hospital for a final check with the nurses, a kiss good-bye, sometimes a little quiet sitting. By nightfall we walked home to our old, unkempt house, fed the neglected cocker spaniel and settled into our private selves.

My mother and I spent those four months in this constant routine: work and school, the hospital, dinner, the hospital, home. We got to know the nurses more than

our friends. My dad's favorite nurse, Anna Camargo, spoke to him in Spanish, and made him smile even when he could no longer speak. I don't know how much he understood but he had spent a few months working the oil fields in Venezuela and had cursed at us in Spanish from time to time. By May, the ward was empty except for one man who arrived in mid-April. Mr. Martin was a burn victim. He was covered from chin to toe by a white tent. He smelled of salves and sprays and flesh... He had burned up his house with his own cigarette. Even his face was a brutal red, patterned like worn leather. I would sneak toward him, fascinated with the gruesomeness of his condition, more exotic and frightening than my father's slow debilitation. Sometimes I liked to peek under the tent to see the burns that nothing could touch. He would let me take a quick glance then shoo me away in a friendly but certain manner. After a while the smell became commonplace, sweet and old and pungent. He was inordinately cheerful. "Just don't bring me a mirror," he would say, his laugh accompanied by a wheezy smoker's cough. "As long as I don't have to look at myself, I can deal with it." My mother liked having the company of another patient. My father would listen and respond for a while, then relax while my mother chattered with Mr. Martin. I liked it too. I could come and go from the room, scavenging for candy stripers and their offerings or plopping myself in the lobby chairs to read or watch people as I had become so accustomed. By June, school was out and our visits were longer and more boring. I spent my days at home, watching television, reading, finally meeting my mom at the hospital. Sometimes I would go to the hospital in the afternoon with my sister-in-law, my brother, a family friend. I

came to dread the evenings at the hospital but the worse he got the more I needed to be there. It was just a matter of time.

During June when my dad's illness seemed endless and inert and my days were endless, I tried playing with our dog, a cocker spaniel that desperately needed my attention. But the dog was my father's dog, and a constant reminder, so I shunned her more than I played with her, giving her only minimal pats as I plunked the can of food into her bowl. She made me sad and I was already full up on sadness. One morning while I was biding my time in the yard, I found a small land turtle in the grass. He was about five inches across and his markings were clear and precise, the delicacy of a Chinese character. His determination amused me. I picked him up and took him to our porch, let him walk the width, turned him around over and over, watching him take off whatever direction he was headed. This activity became my daily sport. I got an old toilet tissue box from the neighborhood grocery and decorated it boldly with magic marker, calling it the Barnes Arms, even drawing tall ionic columns on the front. The box was roomy and tall, so he couldn't get out, and I provided him fresh grass and clover several times a day. I never gave him a name.

By the last week in June, our house was filled with anticipatory grieving. We were sad and as ready as we could be, as my mother would say. When his death seemed imminent, my Aunt Vera arrived to stay with us. She was my mother's older sister. Mom had two sisters and was close to both in different ways. Vera was older, more supportive, alone. Vada, who was less than two years older than my mother,

fought with her all the time. Vera came to make sure Vada didn't. That's the way families work, running interference for each other. Vera also came to take care of me. Having been more independent than might seem normal, I wasn't keen on being taken care of. My mother and I had created an intimate symbiosis, normalcy borne of habit and need. But Vera accepted most of the rituals. She too ate at the steak house, paced the halls of the hospital, gave my mother more breaks to grab a cigarette than I could. The last night, I sat in the hospital lobby waiting for them to come down, waiting for news. The potential for death was palpable. I couldn't read or concentrate. Vera came down first. "Let's play pitch," she said. She would ask me to play her favorite card game whenever I seemed bored. I never wanted to play. I didn't like that game, an old out-of-date card game that my aunt proffered as the highlight of her youth. She would push for a while, then wave her hand in mock disgust at me. Nothing ever seemed as serious as my dad; no anger could meet the fear we had about what was coming. My mother came down at about 7:30 and asked me to go up to see my dad. The request was normal but the mood wasn't. I jumped up nervously, ready to cut through the tension that had overtaken the lobby, but she waited, about to speak. Hesitations in speech were rare for my mother. She was always known for uncensored conversations, itemizing her grocery lists, amidst her deepest fears, to near strangers, but she waited, lit her cigarette and leaned on the green vinyl chair, smoking and staring out the window. I still remember the ache of my stomach, the limbo of wanting it to be over, wanting him to die so we could be done, still haunted by the idea that death was complete darkness and the end of

everything. Each night I went to bed and felt that fear. On this last night I felt it too, watching my mother as she stared into the air.

Mom finally twisted the butt of her cigarette into the sand in the ashtray beside the chair. She waved at me to come with her and turned toward the hall. She never said a word. Vera stayed downstairs while my mother and I walked up the stairs to the room. Mr. Martin was sleeping. An amber beam of evening light lit up his hospital bed as we entered and slowly ebbed as the room became cold and gray even on this June Oklahoma night. The head of his bed was raised and he was propped up against several pillows. A towel was draped around his neck. When I looked into his eyes, the usual pale blue seemed dark and hollow, like the pupil had swallowed his whole eye. His cheeks were sunken; his skin was molded like wax against his cheekbones. Still I kept looking into his eyes. His hands were folded on top of each other. I took one hand and pulled it toward my side of the bed. His arm seemed stiff, immovable. I was afraid to hold on and afraid to let go, afraid I couldn't touch it again, afraid it might break if I moved. I spoke, but he kept looking up, out past everyone. He was small and frail. His once broad shoulders seemed nonexistent in the mass of pillows.

He began to choke so the two nurses working with him shifted him, reshaped the stack of pillows, reached under his back and pulled him gently up. He hadn't talked for weeks but now he made struggling sounds. He couldn't take water. He seemed uncomfortable, tired. Anna, his favorite, was there, gave me a hug, spoke to

me in Spanish as if I understood her. Then she took a wash cloth and gently soaked it in ice water, then touched his mouth with the cloth over and over. Each time she touched him, he breathed deeply and closed his eyes. As I watched, the room seemed silent, frozen, life and death indistinguishable. My mind flitted through random memories, not all good ones like you would think. Some were nice like when we walked to the Safeway to buy marshmallow cookies and Four O'Clock coffee beans and watched the beans grind in the machine, my father holding me up to watch and smell the oily beans; and I remembered when he made lunches for me during second grade. He couldn't work that year, so, stranded at home, he fixed me experimental sandwiches: Peanut butter and raisins. Bologna and peanut butter. Cheese and Fritos on buns. Biscuit burgers. I didn't like these experiments. Sometimes I wouldn't eat them. I even threw fits, flung myself from the table, pouted on the living room couch. He would calmly throw the food in the trash. After a while he gave up, fixed Campbell's soup. By the end of second grade he was in the hospital most of the time.

The nurses gave my dad a shot, lowered his bed a little. He seemed calmer. The conversations in the room resumed and the nurses left. I kissed my father on the cheek and waited for my mom to say goodbye. When we got downstairs, Vera had already gone home and my mom and I silently walked the four blocks together.

It was a humid June night. A thunderhead rose to the south like a mountain. Clouds like that were so common I used to pretend I lived in Colorado, imagined I could go hiking on the cloud hills, hills that moved to different sides of the town. That night lightning flashed in the midst of the gray mass, but it didn't feel like rain.



Heat lightning, my mom always called it. We took the short cut through the alley behind the house. Mom's silence frightened me. She was usually quite a talker, covering up her fears with casual chit chat about what she read in the newspaper, or about relatives I didn't even know. When she was quiet, I knew things were bad. Mom had just lost all her energy.

Our neglected cocker spaniel, greeted us at the back gate. She wiggled her stubby tail insistently, desperate for the attention she had grown used to when dad was home so much. I petted her and clicked my fingers in the air to make her dance but she followed Mom onto the back porch, pretty fed up with me. "Just leave her out tonight," Mom said. Another sign that nothing good was happening.

Vera was standing at the kitchen sink, wearing one of my mom's chenille robes. Mom was much taller than her sister, so it dragged the ground. Mom finally started talking, irritated that Vera was wearing her robe. They grumbled to each other about how few nice things my mother had and how fast Vera had to pack to get here to accommodate her sister and finally the two women just stopped talking, their energy spent. Sometimes arguing kept them going for a few extra hours. Vera continued to wear the robe.

Vera finished washing up the glasses, other than cereal bowls and spoons, pretty much the only dirty dishes we ever had. She excused herself to go read the book she had been trying to finish for weeks. I walked through the house to the front door, turned on the porch light and went outside, letting the screen door slam behind me. My mom yelled to me to be quiet, that I would wake Vera, who I knew was just

reading. Everyone was tense. I sat down by the Barnes Arms and took out my turtle, inspecting his handsome shell. I came out every night to feed him, to give him exercise across the width of the porch. I walked into the front yard, using the light from the porch to find clover, clover buds, and some grass to feed it. I never really knew if that was the right food to give the turtle. I had meant to look it up but never did so I just kept giving him what greens I found, making a sort of turtle salad. I put the new harvest in the box and watched to see if he moved. There seemed to be less old grass from the day before. Maybe he was eating. I took the turtle out of the box and set it down for its constitutional. It was a big porch that spanned the front of the house and wrapped around the south side. Another porch, this one screened in, wrapped around the back of the house. Before dad was sick we spent most summers on the porches. By May we usually moved the kitchen table onto the screened porch and ate all our meals out there. The past few years we hadn't gotten around to it.

The turtle began walking across the porch, slowly, but determinedly. The porch light went off as Mom came through the front door with a drink, a salt shaker, and her pack of cigarettes, matches tucked into the cellophane wrapper. "The light'll just draw bugs," she told me. "Salty dog." She held up her glass as if to toast. Every night she drank a glass of grapefruit juice and vodka. She sat down and shook the salt shaker over the juice mixture. The salt was supposed to go on the rim, but Mom always skipped that step. "It all ends up together anyway. It cuts the bitterness." She took a drink and set the glass down to light her cigarette.

I felt a speech coming, one I didn't want to hear. I got up to check the turtle. It had reached the edge of the porch, and was stalled. I turned it around and waited for the turtle to make its return, continuing my regular coaching duties. "I've talked to your brothers. They're going to meet me at the hospital. We'll stay there through the night. Vera will stay here with you." All that time I hated waiting at the hospital, I hated even more being forced away.

"Can I come with you?" I asked, knowing the answer. The turtle was almost back to the steps. I picked it up and looked at it in the dark, unable to look at my mother. Some of the markings on the bottom seemed almost fluorescent. The turtle began to swim in the air, stretching its neck up and out. I rubbed its shell, touched the top of its head. It pulled itself into the shell, its feet sliding in last, the back ones still visible at the edge of the shell. I put it back into the box and rearranged its new supply of greens.

"Go on up to bed. I'll come kiss you before I leave." My mom stayed on the dark porch, the only light coming from the tip of her cigarette and the distant street lamp down the block. I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want time to move at all, knowing the next minute would be different, would change things. I had felt that way all summer. I usually hated waiting, hated the slowness of summer days, but that year it was different. That year I felt the heaviness of a door in front of me, a door that was opening by itself into a place I didn't want to go. I was afraid to wonder and wish and dream about anything. I watched my mother through the screen door, as she

smoked her cigarette and looked far away. I couldn't see what she saw, couldn't see past that moment, that single moment, what it would be like tomorrow.

When I went to bed, Vera was still reading in the guest bed. I was afraid for my mother to leave. I didn't even undress as I went to bed. I wanted to be ready. Despite the heat, I covered myself with the soft covers, and buried my head in the pillows. Mom came to say good bye, gave me a hug and left immediately. I lay there for a long time, tossing, listening for mom to come home, listening for the phone to ring. Sometimes I got up to look outside, to check the other rooms in the house. After a while I must have fallen asleep. I awoke sweating, the covers all on the floor. It was already sunny and warm inside the closed room. I slept in the largest bedroom, my parents' old room. It was filled with boxes and stacks of old clothes and bedding. My mom had stopped sleeping there, preferring the couch in the living room. As I woke up I heard conversations coming from the kitchen.

Some cousins from out of town had already arrived. A neighbor had brought donuts. They were all chirpy and friendly, as if this were a coffee club. I asked about mom, where was she, where were my brothers? As if I were somehow detached from the whole situation, they informed me that my father was doing badly, that they had to be at the hospital. I was advised to sit down and be patient, eat some donuts. I didn't want the donuts. I didn't want to talk. Vera finally interrupted my gaping silence to send me to the store. We needed cream for the coffee. Lots of people would be coming she said. "Is he dead," I was afraid to ask but did ask. "No," they said. "He's not dead."

I got some money out of a cup we kept on the counter and went out the back door to get half and half. Vera yelled out the door for me to get bacon and eggs too. My brothers would be hungry. She walked out the back to hand me some more money, gave me a hug that I couldn't return. I asked her to tell mom where I was. The store was busy. It was the Friday before the Fourth of July weekend. Stacks of potato chips and cartons of pop were on display. A giant cardboard cutout of a fat man in cookout attire greeted me at the door. I got the food and counted out the cash. "How's your dad?" Mrs. Zimmerman, one of the owners asked. "Fine," I said.

I headed back down our alley. Our house was only a block away. When I arrived I saw that my brother's car was there. At first I was relieved. I wanted to see him, to be part of what was happening. But when I walked in I knew everything was over. I put the sack on the counter and walked into the living room, just listening to them talk. No one seemed to notice I had returned. "It was peaceful." "He wasn't alone." "It was time." My mother was leaning against my brother. I don't know how long I listened. I felt inert as I curled up in my dad's old chair. Finally, someone, I don't know who, said, "Mary's back." My mother hurried in to be with me, more animated than she had been in weeks. Her eyes were red, but she had a giant smile on her face, a smile that always warmed and embarrassed me. She grabbed at me to hold me but I didn't want to be held. She told me how he went to sleep, that Bill, my brother, was with him. Bill came in too to tell me. None of it felt real. I tried to be nice or thought I was trying to be nice. It's hard to tell when you're ten, or anytime, when you feel so different from how you should act. My mom

started crying again, holding my face to her chest, but I just felt angry and distant, alien.

I did let her hug me, hugged my brother long enough that they thought I was okay. They went back into the kitchen and talked, encouraged me to join them but let me be. Some other neighbors started to arrive. Vera called out breakfast orders as she made herself useful, frying bacon and eggs.

I couldn't go into the kitchen. Everyone seemed to be reconciled to what had happened. I had even wished for it to happen, for everything about his illness to go away, even wishing him dead. But when it happened, I couldn't absorb it, couldn't fill the giant space in front of me. I headed toward the door, walked out on the front porch to play with the turtle. The box stood upright but it was empty. The grass, the clover, the turtle were gone. I looked up and down the porch, crawled through the flower bed and the shrubs that surrounded the house. I checked the box again. I opened the front door, hardly able to speak, "I can't find my turtle," I called into the kitchen.

"I let it go this morning, honey," Vera called from the kitchen, invisible in the crowd. "You can't keep a turtle boxed up like that."

It was already steaming hot, even in the shade of the porch. I went back inside and looked down the hall to the kitchen. Seven or eight people were sitting around the table. Mom held a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She seemed, for once, relaxed.

Vera called out to me, "Do you want something to eat?"

“No,” I said. I watched a little more and walked back out to the porch. The screen door slammed behind me.

## A Certain Oklahoman

Every Sunday evening from February to June, until the Sundays were gone, Frank Ruthroff visited my father at the hospital to play Tennessee Ernie Ford gospel music.

*What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
all because we do not carry  
everything to God in prayer.*

He sat in the armchair by the side of the bed, opened the lid on his brown and tan portable phonograph and placed the week's selection on the turntable.

*You load sixteen tons and whattaya get?  
Another day older and deeper in debt.  
St. Peter don't you call me cause I can't go.  
I owe my soul to the company store.*

The two men talked of work (they were accountants), the weather, and little else. They mostly listened to deep-voiced gospel.

*And he walks with me  
And he talks with me  
And he tells me I am his own  
And the joy we share as we tarry there  
None other has ever known.*

My family joked about his visits, his solemn religious conviction, but no one told him not to come. He arrived each Sunday, in his navy blue suit, quiet and believing.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me . . .*



*I once was lost, but now I'm found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

He was a pallbearer, brought beets to the family dinner,  
and drove eighty miles to the cemetery alone. After all the casserole  
dishes were returned, and the glory of mourning was over,  
Frank Ruthroff phoned to see how we were.

## Undertones

I prefer layers of meaning,  
subtle, resistant, patient,  
the second layer waits.

Honeysuckle, the first layer  
transparent, if scent  
could be clear, invisible,  
but there, enclosing  
a suffocating, sweet  
thickness, unavailable  
until you leave. Then,  
like memory, it arrives.  
Try, and it's gone,  
a pleasurable tease,  
it coaxes and haunts.

Late one night  
on a bus to Colorado,  
a man placed his flannel  
shirt across my chest  
to warm me. My mother,  
dozing, snapped like  
a frightened cat. He  
raised his hands, level,  
as if to calm. "She was  
cold," he said. He walked  
away. His scent lingered.  
Strong. Sweet. Safe.  
I slept through the night.  
The next morning  
he was gone, his shirt  
still rested on my shoulders,  
his scent embedded  
in the threads.

Sometimes, I imagine  
death, a different kind  
of afterlife. Not separate  
but withheld, protected,  
too sweet, too strong  
to be present. Or  
is it life that lasts,

a memory, a gentle reminder  
unavailable  
until it's gone?

## The House on Wyandotte

I remember tiger lilies and snapdragons and spirea and forsythia, jumbled in our yard. An unnamed vine, that climbed the trellis, had long since stopped blooming whatever flowers it bloomed, became as weed, wild and carefree, hiding the chipped paint on the garage wall.

The honeysuckle masked the sultry scent of spirea. Aromas of summer blended into one scent of flowers and dirt and grass and sweat, light at first, only a hint in May when temperatures stretched toward warm. The lilies, the irises rose tall, just below the window sills.

Alert and gregarious snapdragons sprawled and clung to each other beneath the front steps. I imagined them guard plants.

I knew nothing about the plants, their habits, their natures. They were perennial, time and space identified, comforts of spring. The forsythia out the back window interrupting tornado skies. White clusters of spirea to the north, a fence between us and the transient renters, their overbearing cottonwood littering our yard with its young.

The lilies, mostly orange, virile, waxy, hid in the side yard. A few white ones, religious, pure, arose, condescended in their midst. My father always watched, adored the white ones, some omen.

We had little grass, mostly clover. I didn't know to mind. I made tufted blossom chains, endless reverie, and hunted for infrequent luck among the leaves. The clover was soft, better than grass for lounging, watching the sky, my back cushioned by clover carpet.

Clouds made shadows, shapes, filtered the Oklahoma sun. In July we would kill for clouds.

Mornings were calm, secret. Alone, I dressed in seersucker shorts and crop tops they were called, that let the air in. Clothes small and cool, made for warm afternoons.

In the morning I absorbed the soft, cool breeze, ate toast on the back porch and listened. I watched our cocker spaniel sniff and roll, chase the neighbor's cat as it slunk through the shade of bushes.

By midday the shade had gone, the sun bore down across the back, the front, already dry and brown by June. Only the side yard stayed green, clover-filled, hidden by hedges and aging, disease-ridden elm trees leaning over from the city easement.

On the hottest days in July and August, nothing green was left. The sprinklers were merely amusement, a means of cooling ourselves, not the long extinguished growth in the yard. We had a hose punctured with holes placed every inch or so, used to water grass and hot humans on summer days. Even my mother on rare days at home joined me in her navy blue swim suit, saved from her youth. Feigning embarrassment, she ran through and through and through the spouting water.

By evening the heat had beat us all, even it had lost its will, settling in on everything. I sat on the front porch, shaded by the overhanging roof, pretended to travel to foreign lands in a theatrical troupe. What had been physical play, musical comedies with one player in the spring, gave way to head games. My imagination grew abstract as the temperature rose. Even the songs were silent, more perfect in summer.

When my father still worked, before illness kept him in hiding at home or in the hospital, I would wait on the porch until 5:15, listen for his whistle as he walked home from work, and run to meet him at Mrs. McPheeter's driveway, halfway down the block. I stopped at a single crack in the pavement to meet him, teetered on its imaginary crevice. I would reach to grab his hand as he pulled me along, forcing me to match his immense stride with my short, skinny legs. I smelled the last hint of his morning Old Spice and the soft scent of perspiration, not strong but real, intoxicating.

## Anatomy Lesson

We purchased the set of Grolier encyclopedias, complete with the bonus books, from a bona fide traveling salesman who arrived on our porch in early fall, 1962. That evening it was finally cool enough to sit outside in the evening. Oklahoma had a way of hanging onto the heat, protecting it until a blast of cold barged in full-blown about mid-November. Fall was a bonus season, never expected and rare, despite everyone's attempt to pretend its existence by wearing heavy sweaters and wool socks to September football games. The store windows were painted with fake leaves all up and down the glass. Edwards Women's Clothing Store, had even placed an industrial fan, the kind used in garages and welder's shops, in one corner of the display case to simulate a cold gust. The faux wind grabbed at the ends of the colorful knit scarves adorning the perennial pea coats on the mannequins. The fan was tucked behind a tag board tree, painted all silver and brown with a swirling knothole in the middle. I know all this because my mother, in addition to being a sales clerk in the Edwards' shoe department, was the window decorator. She called herself a designer because she read that term in a want ad in the Tulsa World: Window Product Display Designer. The term never really caught on with Mr. Lawrence, the manager, but he regularly told her he appreciated all her work and her volunteering to do the windows every couple of weeks. What that meant was that she didn't get to do it during work hours so we usually spent Sunday afternoons fixing up the windows and eating cold sandwiches. Mr. Lawrence preferred that we

undress the mannequins when the store was closed so we would avoid exciting the teenage boys who hung around downtown, particularly on Saturdays.

On this cool October evening Mom and I moved out to the porch after supper. She had gotten out of her work clothes and seemed more than commonly relaxed. She met the evening leaning up against the porch post, holding her mug of coffee to her chin, sipping rarely, appreciatively, as if the lukewarm liquid held some concentrated power. I had the usual fidgets. I was twelve and had just entered seventh grade. The year was supposed to be a transition. It was to hold some moment of transformation between childhood and maturity, but like most of those moments in my life, I just waited for it and fidgeted, and nothing seemed to happen. No one called me to pass on rumors or to chat about boys. I rarely had homework so I spent most evenings either reading or being bored. My fidgets were a nuisance to my mother who regularly told me to find something to do, but mostly I just stayed busy irritating her.

So we sat, oppositional and dependent, like atomic particles anchored to the porch, when a blonde man, probably in his early thirties walked up our sidewalk, carrying two silver metallic cases. I immediately noticed his face even though it was ordinary. He smiled the smile of someone who had smiled too much for too little result, a smile pressed down from above by exhausted, pleading eyes, a smile my mother could understand, a smile she used everyday in the shoe department, shoving



size six shoes onto size eight feet and smiling that pitiful, bored, and relentless smile. So when he arrived on our porch with his two silver bags, and those two tired, hopeless smiles met, it was clear we would see what this man had to offer in the way of goods.

My mom was in a spending place that fall. Not that she earned a salary to speak of. She was what we now call untrained retail. But in her mind we had money to burn, insurance money. Not much really, but my mother, who had lived on borrowed money and generous creditors for years, got a check in the mail. I never knew the amount of that check. She kept it a secret from me, from her nosy brother in Kansas City, from her sister-in-law in Omaha, even though they called regularly to ask, even trying to get me to decipher her check stubs, an act I would have relished had I thought of it myself. But I sort of liked the spending mom. I liked riding the coattails of her largesse and knew Uncle Bob would be right in the middle of our living room putting the kibosh on her generosity if he got any information. We had a kitchen drawer full of bills, but it never occurred to mom that paying bills should come before living well. She was desperate for life, desperate for a payback for all those years of being poor, for all those years of sending checks to snooty doctors, or forgetting to pay them because they “didn’t do a damn thing to save dad,” or to make her life one bit more worth living. The insurance check was a gift from the powers that even things out and gifts don’t pay bills. Gifts buy Nash Ramblers for a woman who had never learned how to drive. Gifts remodel a worn out old house that hasn’t the strength for remodeling. Gifts buy velvet suits for a forty-three year-old woman

who hasn't had a man for five years and thinks a velvet suit will get her one. Gifts on that particular Thursday evening in October buy a set of Grolier encyclopedias from a man with tired eyes, a willing smile, and a tolerance for a lonely woman. He had a vulture's sensibility, natural and innate, that led him through our pockmarked screen door that rarely opened for anyone.

It was a couple months later that six big cardboard boxes appeared on our front porch. Mom had purchased them on the installment plan, assuming that money would appear in later months that was nonexistent today. I never saw the salesman again but after that evening my mom started going out at night or came home later from work, later like nine or ten o'clock from a job that ended at five-thirty. She would call from a pay phone and say she was meeting a friend. I had my suspicions.

After I called mom at the store to tell her about the delivery, I hauled the boxes in from the porch but I was under strict orders to wait until she got home from work to open them. There were three sets of books: The official and mainstream Grolier Encyclopedia – I had an argument with my best friend who told me that these encyclopedias were inferior to her Britannica and would thus have inferior and incorrect knowledge in them, but I assured her that being new, they would be much more current and have much more up-to-date information than her old Britannica from the 1950's, like the new stuff about Alan Shepherd and the Mercury Space Missions. The Book of Knowledge was thematically rather than alphabetically arranged, with lots of charts and pictures, and even poetry and stories in them. They looked pretty in two tone maroon and white, kind of like high school years books.

And the Book of Popular Science was the really famous book in this series, according to our salesman, especially for “a smart young lady like me.” It offered us detailed explanations of all the new advances in scientific discovery along with experiments you could do at home. The previous Christmas I had wheedled my mother into giving me a microscope and lab set I had seen at the Woolworths Store. I was all ready to turn myself into a mad scientist but my cousin, on Christmas day, broke all the small flasks of chemicals onto our mother’s brand new Samsonite card table, so that the plastic top looked like a third-degree burn, and eliminated any possibility for doing experiments beyond looking at bugs and eyelashes through the microscope. Now with these miraculous books, I was ready to delve into science in all its experimental glory. As soon as mom got home we went straight for the boxes. Nothing smells like new books and these boxes exuded new book aroma and sent it wafting through our old dilapidated house, a house made more tolerable by doubling as a library.

Mom spent most of the evening rearranging bookshelves so we could display our fifty new books, with the promise of annual updates to come. My friend’s Britannica didn’t get updates, proof that this purchase was a smart one. As I looked at the rows of black and maroon and gray, I knew that all this knowledge was going to change my life. I picked up samples, first the encyclopedia, finding it useful but unexciting – a convenient tool for school reports. The Book of Knowledge was attractive but seemed cute and immature for someone at my level. I could share it with my niece, use it as a babysitting tool. The Book of Popular Science was

beautiful. The outside was steel gray, with orange print, deceptively simple, but it was filled with hundreds of color photos of nuclear explosions and molecular models, gamma rays, X-rays and color-coded periodic tables. But the absolute coolest thing in the book was the transparent overlay of the human body. As I picked up Volume 7, the book fell open to six crisp pages of acetate. I looked straight into an empty outline of the human body, the acetate sheets having fallen to the left. But then I pulled the acetate pages over the body and saw, first a completely fleshed out man, or sort of a man, his sexual organs blurred like a Ken doll. Each piece of acetate lifted to reveal a new anatomical system: first the skeleton, ribs and pelvic bone iridescent, then the nervous system like electrical wires, Christmas tree lights winding their way around the body, then the adrenal system, small dabs of color, that seemed hardly worth displaying on a separate sheet, the cardio-vascular system, tubular red and blue patriotic fireworks that splayed the body, the heart like a stilled and flat bagpipe surrounded by two gray masses, and finally the digestive system, stomach, liver, bladder all leading back up through the esophagus to the mouth and nose. All layers of activity artificially disentangled to explain the way we work. All made simple and beautiful. I followed the layers over and over one at a time, watching how each organ or gland or bone or nerve matched up with the layers before and after.

Each night I would come home, do my homework, if I had any, and look at the new books. Sometimes I tried experiments pretending to be Mr. Wizard, hooking up batteries and rubber bands and making play dough out of flour and water. Mostly I looked at the acetate pages, lifting the layers one at a time. I would sit on the floor,

book open before me, and watch quiz shows on television while I waited for my mom to come home from work. She came home later and later as the fall went on. The salesman seemed to have given way to other men she met at the After Five Club, a place he had introduced her to, a place accustomed to traveling salesmen. She could have a cocktail and relax. She felt safe there. She would call usually, say she would be late, not to stay up, it was a school night. Sometimes she forgot to call. Some nights I got scared and called the club. She didn't like that. I began to wonder if she told them about me, the daughter at home. On the nights I called, she would come home earlier, angrier. I learned, after a few months, to let it be, to enjoy her tipsy good nature when she arrived on the porch, said good night to whoever was passing through town. "I won't just let anyone in here," she would say to me as she walked through the door.

One Friday she didn't come home at all. When I got home from school I found a note that said she had a chance for some fun. I could get food at the grocery store. They would just bill her. I called the store where she worked and they said she left early. I walked to Zimmerman's, our regular grocery store, got chips, hot dogs, milk, a couple of candy bars to make me feel better, and went back home. By Saturday I wasn't hungry. I tried to read. I couldn't concentrate. I thought about telling someone she was gone but was afraid she would be mad. I walked around a lot. My friend Susie called and asked me to go to a movie. I was afraid mom would come home, that I would miss her when she got there, afraid she might leave again, so I didn't go. I played with the dog but she just acted like everything was fine,

wanting to be petted over and over again. I listened to music and tried to sing along. I walked some more. Late in the afternoon I imagined someone breaking into our house. I locked all the doors, watched the entrances from the upstairs windows. Finally a car pulled up in front of the house. My mom and a man got out. I stayed upstairs, waiting for her to say goodbye. Instead, they both came in. "Mary," she called. I didn't answer. I was afraid. "Mary, come down here." She was yelling up the stairs. I straightened my hair, my shirt and walked down into our entryway. "This is George," she said. George was older than the encyclopedia salesman. He looked like a dad, like someone regular. George put out his hand to shake. I extended my hand but I wasn't friendly. I didn't know what to do with this person. My mom was clearly happy. She flitted around the house, flirting like a teenager. They brought pizza and Dr. Pepper, an obvious ploy. I was supposed to join them for dinner. We sat at the kitchen table. They drank coffee. After a while mom asked me to go upstairs with her. "He's going to stay over." I didn't know what she meant. "He's going to spend the night," she said. He lives in Muskogee. He comes here every week for his job. He's going to start staying here for a while, just when he comes to town." I asked her what I was supposed to do while they were here. She said, "Take your books upstairs with you. You can read. Take those science books you like so much."

That night I lay in bed and listened to them, talking, moaning, talking some more. At first I thought something was wrong but then I understood. I turned up my radio. I didn't feel like reading. After a few weeks I stopped noticing. George kept

coming to our house for most of the school year. He always brought me food, sometimes toiletries like lavender bubble bath or Jean Nate splash, a bottle of vodka for mom. They would go out in the evenings to the After Five Club and come back for the night. Mom would always check on me, smother me with her alcoholic breath. After a couple months, they started taking me to breakfast at a café near my school. At first I was nervous someone would see. I would have to explain George. I would have to say my mother was sleeping with a man. But no one did see, no one that I knew, and I liked the breakfasts, the ride to school. I always ordered the same breakfast: sausage and toast. a glass of orange juice. George made fun of my routine. He showed me pictures of his son. He and his wife were separated, he told me. It was hard but necessary, he explained. I liked the order of his presence. Mom seemed happier. Life seemed more predictable. She liked the attention. She liked it when he put his arms around her. After a while I stopped imagining my father and got used to George.

By June my mother started coming home on time again, plopped on the couch and smoked. I fixed her vodka with grapefruit juice. I usually fixed dinner. She cried some but not like when my dad died. We rearranged the house, moved the encyclopedias to the dining room. "It's where you do your homework anyway, isn't it?" Finally, I asked her what was wrong, what had happened to George. She shook her head and said, he had to go home. She understood but she didn't think her body could take any more losing. And all I could see was her body, not acetate pages, separate and intact, but entangled, reverberating pain.

## Madonna of the Plains

Our campus art museum owns a wonderful Madonna, carved by the German sculptor of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Tilman Riemenschneider. The intricate medieval cuts in lindenwood delineate an intense Madonna who carries her dark future inside her. The placard describing this gem of the museum says she has a “pensive” face. I reject that description, as I often reject the simplified descriptors on museum tags. Her straight and firm mouth says to me, “I know what will happen.” It is not a trusting face. There is no peace but there is hardened resignation. She holds the child out from her body as if to hand him over, not willingly, but, without choice. The flatness of the expression, the gesture, is countered by the elegant lines of the carving, the flow of the wooden drapery, “as if it were bronze.” I have always been drawn to that Madonna. As an undergraduate at this same university, I used to stare at her face when I entered our old museum to go to classes. Unlike the other sculpture of its time, this sculpture was unpainted, the artist choosing the pale tones of the lindenwood to iconographically accurate red and blue robes. My love of this Madonna is not historical. Her earthbound qualities intensify the meaning for me.

My fascination with Madonna imagery came late in my life as something conscious. I grew up in a Disciples of Christ Church in Oklahoma. The primary image, besides the anemic protestant stained glass windows in the sanctuary, was the Warner Sallman portrait of Jesus, depicting him as a long-faced, blue-eyed, European, resembling Jeffrey Hunter who played Jesus in the movie *King of Kings* in



the 1950's – film art imitating American iconography. The Bible we used was the revised standard version and pretty much everything in that church would fall into that characterization, revising us into middle-class Christians.

As someone who abandoned religion early on (My original skepticism came with the insistence by my first grade Sunday school teacher that dogs don't go to heaven.), I am still fascinated with the psychology of faith and commitment. Over years of visiting museums, I've observed the expressions on the faces of Madonnas, both painted and sculpted. I trace that specific interest to a day in my Renaissance Art History class, the day after some maniac defaced the Michaelangelo Pieta at the Vatican. My teacher projected a slide of the Pieta, in pristine historical condition, for us to view silently for the entire class period, some fifty minutes. Some of the people in my class found it sentimental or grandstanding, this teacher tugging at our emotions like some tear-jerker movie director, but I just kept looking at that mother's face and wondered what Michelangelo thought of this woman he had created out of marble. Other favorite Madonnas have come from travels – Da Vinci's Madonna of the Rocks in the National Gallery in London, Raphael's Alba Madonna in Washington, D.C. But all of these madonnas seem other-worldly to me, even the Riemenschneider that enticed me in the first place as I searched for the expression of anguish I attribute to the woman so revered and mythologized.

I realized a few years ago that my love of that Madonna and fascination with her human emotions goes back, not to visits to museums filled with medieval and renaissance artwork, but to the monthly visits my family made to a museum outside

of Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Woolaroc Museum is on the property of Frank Phillips, the oil millionaire who started the oil company in his name, a company now gone the way of most corporations, merged and reconstituted into Conoco-Phillips.

Bartlesville was a company town and Woolaroc was our own community museum and playground. The entire estate – named as a combination of woods, lakes and rocks – is open to the public. For years the company held departmental picnics on the lakes, provided outdoor activities for the children of employees. And it was, during my childhood, the place where we took all of our relatives to spend a day at our own tourist destination. We would make a picnic lunch of fried chicken, baked beans, potato salad, along with a thermos of iced tea. We would eat on the stone tables and tempt the deer that hovered nearby. We would always finish the day in the cool of the museum, which housed a collection of Native and Western art as well as such oddities as Wiley Post's plane, shrunken heads from the Amazon, coin-operated displays of Indian dancing, and the world's largest collection of Colt guns. In the phrase of cultural criticism, it didn't know what it was trying to be, a realization I didn't have until I visited again in my thirties. As a child, it was simply a collection of wonderful images and textures, all of which took me far away or to a past much richer than the one depicted in television westerns. I knew each room by heart and often served as the family guide. As odd as this museum was, it unquestionably inspired my interest in art and museums and my sense of comfort in those spaces.

Woolaroc had no official images of Madonnas but did house images of mothers that forced me to contemplate womanhood differently as I was growing up.

Besides dozens of paintings depicting native women, the museum still owns all of the entries to the competition for the Pioneer Woman, a seventeen-foot statute that stands today in Ponca City, Oklahoma, a monument to the struggles of women who settled the West. I have never seen the fully constructed monument. Ponca City is only about fifty miles from where I grew up; nevertheless I didn't travel there, never had a reason. But I regularly saw the three-foot model sculpture that won the national contest along with all of the other entries. First of all I was intrigued with art contests. A fledgling artist myself, or so my teachers told me, I imagined mailing off sculptures and paintings to contests all over the world. Each time I visited the museum, I created the contest anew, asking our guests which sculpture was their favorite, and why. My mother engaged in this competition with fervor, herself preferring the model that got second place in the publicized contest that sent these models on tour across the United States. E. W. Marland, the oilman who created the competition in 1926, preferred yet another, one that I hated and my mother considered "bad art." So each visit we examined these women carefully, and each time I honed my analytical and descriptive abilities. But, more importantly, each time my relationship to these sculptures, ultimately these women, became more intimate. My love of the competition gave way to my fascination with a group of women who lived in this museum, women who expressed different ways of coping.

All of the models were named, sometimes oddly to my mind. The winner, by Bryant Baker, was called "Confident," and that name seemed appropriate. She strides forward, bonneted (they were nearly all bonneted) face resolute, a bible in her right

hand, a large satchel over her right shoulder, and a young, eager son hanging on to her other hand. Both figures seem determined, forthright – confident. She has no gun, no apparent sadness. There is no man in the picture but there is no sense of loss, only clear forward motion toward the future. The sculpture is idealized, triumphant – adversity left behind. Her child, her small sack of worldly goods, and her Bible, are all she needs to survive.

The second-place winner, my mother's choice, was caught in the midst of surviving. Rather than stepping forward, she is watching carefully to the right as she lifts the rifle from her husband's dying body, a cactus providing a backdrop for both large figures. Tucked under her other arm is a baby, facing backward, no involvement in the drastic move its mother is making. Like in a pieta figure, the man is dying and the woman must go on, this time to take his place in the context of war. Her face is guarded, alert. Her movement seems quiet and direct. The name of this sculpture is "Protective."

Many of the other models seem to imitate the Madonnas and female figures of the past. One has clothes draped so closely as to be transparent, her breasts and naval apparent, a Greek figure of the American West. It is entitled, "Faithful." Another one, "Determined" seems equally European but much more modern, streamlined, looking more like a WWI nurse than a pioneer woman. I cannot help but think, as I now realize the date of these models, that the devastation of WWI might have been its inspiration. Another, Marland's favorite, "Trusting," was the one my mother hated. The woman is contained, carved minimally, almost primitively, her only movement in

the pinching of her skirt between her thumb and fingers. Most distinctive of all is her lack of a face. Her exaggerated bonnet protrudes and casts a large shadow on her flattened, buttoned chest – an “anywoman” of the prairie.

Several others – “Self-Reliant,” “Fearless,” “Sturdy,” all indicate their titles and depict women standing firmly within their pedestals, no challenge to the sculptural status quo. “Heroic,” seems more like a cartoon than an homage to heroism. Her tidy head, supported by a pencil neck, betrays no fear or fury, as she sits in a chair, a gun across her lap. The child is tucked so closely to her bosom, it is hardly visible. A dog sits alertly at her feet, more worldly than the woman. The most controversial on our visits was the one entitled, “Affectionate.” This one depicts a woman sitting, nursing her child, a nude transformed into motherhood. Her utilitarian clothing falls from her shoulders and hips. Her knee is thrust out to balance the child and she watches tentatively, almost pleadingly, toward the world. She is the only one of the models with native characteristics and is the one most intimate with her child. Many of my relatives had a problem with this statue, not because of the woman’s naked breast but because she was openly nursing. “It’s over the line,” or “It’s just too much,” they would say, turning away as if this image were more difficult to abide than the dead husband in another model. My mom disagreed with these relatives. This statue wasn’t her favorite but it was up there. “There are thousands of naked women in museums all over the world,” she would say. But those naked figures were art that had no connection with the reality my aunts and cousins knew in Kansas or Nebraska or Missouri or Oklahoma. These figures represented their grandmothers in

their daily activities. “All the more reason to show her nursing,” my mother would argue. And these pioneer women were Madonnas of the plains. With bible or gun or child, they were taking up a mission and were deemed heroic for their actions.

As I’ve wandered museums over the years, I’ve searched for Madonnas with the characteristics of these pioneer women. I’ve examined their faces to see if they are confident, self-reliant, protective, or affectionate. Sometimes their faces are masks, tucked into more elaborate sculptures telling someone else’s story. Sometimes they are enigmatic, as if the artist either questions or disguises the thoughts of this mythical woman. My favorites are the ones who express some emotion, an emotion that ties them to the faces on the women of Woolaroc or the women I see around me, the ones engaged in their daily activities, looking out at the world as it sneaks up on them or overwhelms them. The Riemenschneider Madonna seems resigned to but unhappy about the future of herself and her child. But her emotion is real and compelling. Each Madonna tells a different story about her own reaction, her artist’s reaction, even if she is part of a story that gets retold over and over again.

## Spaces

An assignment  
in seventh grade math  
was to make  
a polyhedron  
from construction  
paper. I chose  
red, the only red  
sheet, faded  
on one corner.  
Careful to cover  
the blotch, I  
folded it  
just so. No one  
could see the flaw.  
The shape stood firmly  
on the shelf, bright  
red. Everyone  
thought it was  
beautiful.

I had a tree,  
the kind you grow  
in water  
and rocks.  
My friends gazed  
in amazement  
at the beautiful  
tree of no soil.  
If you looked  
closely,  
you could see  
the aching  
bend of the frail  
trunk. No one  
would have noticed  
the tree  
at all,  
in soil.

At night, after  
I have washed  
the sheets, the covers  
bound tightly about  
my feet, I feel  
the spaces outside  
and cannot  
sleep.



## I Wonder

I try to recall some clear vision, some moment when I knew “this was it,” about anything. I sort of make believe certainty in retrospect, pretending I knew things when I didn’t. There were moments when I wanted something so bad that my stomach hurt and I couldn’t eat for the life of me. There was the time I met Tom, before I really knew him, and sat with him at a party I was giving with my then husband Jim. It was a last hurrah. We were already breaking up but, true to Jim’s character, he’s always gotten some kick out of rubbing salt in wounds. You wouldn’t know it by just meeting him. He seems placid, reserved, but he always finds a spot in a conversation to challenge what you say. He did that to me on a regular basis and made me feel like I’d been sleeted on by the end of most days. So, after a lot of years, we got our lives together enough to split up. We’d been living kind of side-by-side in an apartment for over a year. We decided to give an excessive Halloween party as a grand exit. Jim was a sleight-of-hand magician so he invited all of his magic friends to do tricks and I invited all my university friends to watch. I added some guys I thought were cute or interesting to the mix, trying to get myself ready for being free. Tom was one of those, well actually, the main one. I first saw him at an English 101 grading session, not the usual pick-up environment, but he made me catch my breath in a way I hadn’t for a long time. He was still married too, but not really. He had a separate house right next to campus but hadn’t gotten up the guts to make it final, mostly because he had a daughter he adored. So he came to the party

late enough that I thought he wasn't coming, late enough that I started snapping at Jim for having this damn party in the first place. I started saying how weird it's going to be to tell everyone the next week that he's moving out to a different apartment. Jim, in his usually oblivious way, just kept doing magic tricks and talking to the other guys who were fanning cards and palming coins to everyone they could corner.

Well, Tom arrived kind of frustrated because he didn't like the directions I put on the invitation, saying I made no reference to north or south, which is true because I don't really think that way. I've lived here too long to describe the town like it has any connection with some universal plan. He acted pretty much like an asshole and, per usual for me, I assumed his actions were my fault and spent the next half hour trying to make him happy. Pretty soon he calmed down and seemed to like my fawning attention. Once again, per usual, as soon as somebody starts acting nice to me, I start teasing and giving them a hard time, so our banter was established. He got nice and I got ornery and we settled in on two rental fold-up chairs in the spare bedroom to talk. The room had been set up for magic performances scheduled every half hour. We had the room between acts. I started asking him questions about where he was from and what he did when he wasn't teaching English. And he thrived on telling me, asking me an occasional question in the mix, but mostly talking about himself, which I got the idea he didn't get to do very much.

After a while we were the only people in the room amidst a little army of metal chairs and I started getting nervous, since I was supposed to be married to someone else and supposed to be giving the party. As soon as I got up to check on

whether people were finding the beer and the chip-and-dip, he shifted around and announced he had to go. He did take my hand for a little longer than seemed normal, and told me it was “really nice talking,” dipping his head in a “you understand don’t you “ way, but then he did the same thing without the words to Jim. So I gave up on everything spinning around in my head right then. I spent the rest of the party fretting about, walking in and out of the apartment, trying to shut off the engine in my brain. The party didn’t end until twoish, when the last magicians packed up their Hoyles and staggered out. Jim muttered something about a farewell romp in the hay, which I couldn’t bear, so I said I’d stay up and clean the kitchen. The whole time, all I could think of was this asshole who wanted better directions but who gave me something to want. Jim moved out the following Monday and I planned every route I walked on campus around where Tom taught or ate or lived. I was acting twenty years younger than my age, but I just couldn’t help it. I liked wanting so much.

I look back on those weeks before I knew Tom wanted me too and try to grasp the unknowing that I had, the unknowing that I have since translated into destiny, love at first encounter. I pretend that we were both so drawn to each other that it couldn’t have happened otherwise, but in truth I didn’t know and still don’t know how many others things might have happened throughout the throes of that relationship. There are other times I wanted things. I wanted my dad to live. He didn’t. I wanted to be an artist. I have no idea any more how to judge that wish or its attainment. I know that certainty comes from seeing things work, the old hindsight clarity that we write about.

In fact, during that time I wanted Tom, I wasn't even sure I wanted Jim to go away. Oh sure, intellectually I knew that we had hit the wall as a couple, that we would never pull out of the deep gorge we had dug for ourselves. But we had dug it together and that counts for a lot. Jim almost immediately started dating his office mate, while encouraging me to think once more about letting him move back in. Now that kind of certainty doesn't even have a place to hang onto in my head. But he lived in that double commitment just fine. When I was talking to Tom at parties, or in the halls, I still felt pangs of guilt about stepping into some new relationship. I wanted something new but I was afraid of taking the wrong path. I kept accusing myself, as I am accustomed to do, of being chicken, of hanging on to Jim as security, of giving false signals. These self-accusations led me to be especially cruel to Jim, so that at night, when I played my internal tape recorder back while I tried to go to sleep or not to, whichever gave me the most difficulty, I could assure myself that my own accusations were untrue. I spent several months in this pathetic dialogue until Jim seemed comfortably entrenched in his new relationship, and I could rest easy believing that whatever happened with Tom was the path I had committed to.

That really is what certainty seems to be. The path you decide to commit to. But it never seems to get easy for me. I spend my life reading the works of people like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce who laud epiphanies, invent characters having their visions right and left. But the truth is these writers and their characters have the same problems and the whole reason to write the visions into fiction is that writers can make the revelations truly reveal the future if they want. After all, they can just

make up the path for their characters to follow, or just leave the path hanging out into the future, the proverbial ever after. Neither Woolf nor Joyce had a clue about their own paths really except that they were artists or damned sure wanted to be. Now we look back at every epiphany they tell us about and examine it in relation to their lives. I match up their epiphanies with my own, as if I'm looking for some McCall's pattern for writers, stuffed somewhere in a file drawer in eighth grade home economics. I hate simple but I hunger for it.

Most of the epiphanies I have had are pretty small things, observations in the flow of life, like when my Mother used to refer to the house as looking like a "cyclonestruckit." I thought that was some big messy object from her childhood, until one day the word just hung in the air and readjusted itself into three separate words and I figured out the difference between spoken and written English.

But the big stuff like death happens, and life is short, and love is what you make it just have to dawn on you over and over and over again. My head is so hard or the lessons are so complicated they just don't take permanently. I've always thought the term should be "repiphany" because any really meaningful insight bears frequent repeating.

I did end up marrying Tom and seeing it as the right and only path, being pretty certain that life had taken its proper turn. But then Tom died, which I didn't see as part of the path, and I had to take my certainty to another level, being certain that I lost him, but wondering what I was supposed to get out of all that loss. I got lonely and uncertain pretty fast. Sure, I did realize pretty dramatically that death was

real, but even that realization had come before, not so hard or close. My dad died when I was a kid, too young to process in any intellectual way. And my best friend Randy died when we were sophomores in college. I just handled his death with guilt, making it about me when it wasn't. But Tom's death made me rearrange my life. I had to look at the empty space on my bed, and see the gaping hole in my future. So once again I spent months trying to figure out what was left to be certain about, besides death that is, because death alone as a certainty can be pretty depressing.

I'm not good at being lonely even though I'm rather demanding about being alone when I choose. So I had trouble dealing with all that loneliness I was stuck with. I was deemed a tragic widow for a while, which seemed a little too certain to accommodate my natural inclination for ambiguity. Then a friend introduced me to someone I knew about but didn't know. We went out. We connected. I wanted again. But along with the wanting came fear and doubt. Now years later I have again translated my experience into fate. I frame our experience with certainty. We are together. The story reads like an Oprah show. "Widower with two young adopted children from Costa Rica meets widow who loves kids. They become a family." Voila. But it started out as just another layer of uncertainty that became a path. The morning after I spent the night with David, I stated emphatically to myself that I wasn't going to be involved, that I didn't have anything left to commit. Death was the clearest image for me. All this messy life was just getting in the way of my vision. But I did see him again. I met his kids, now my kids. I just kept walking on the path and paying attention as I walked. Sometimes, I literally stopped and gasped

in fear and anxiety. Sometimes I still do. Just last week I imagined myself in an apartment in Kansas City. It overlooked the Country Club Plaza. I had stopped working at the university. Each day I took a walk, stopped for coffee at the nearby patisserie, wrote and painted most of every day. I had a few friends, but not many. I was tired. I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I imagined this life for a few days, my thoughts interrupted by phone calls and grading and grocery shopping. As the fantasy lifted, I felt overwhelming guilt, guilt at wanting some freedom, guilt at not appreciating the life that fills and fulfills my days, and guilt at not being able to be certain even when I am. I can't imagine anything that would pull me away from the path I'm on. I won't allow myself to imagine disaster anymore and I don't want to be elsewhere. But something in my very being causes me to question, to doubt, to wonder.

It is late afternoon. I have decided to fix myself a cup of tea. I want something herbal, light, relaxing. I have lots of choices on my pantry shelf. I spend about five minutes shifting boxes around, reading the hype on the Celestial Seasonings packaging, as if the description of taste or effect would really matter. Finally I decide on Red Zinger, not by what I read, but by the taste and smell I remember. I want something tart, strong, a taste I will notice. Otherwise, it doesn't really matter. The tea tastes good. It satisfies me. Tomorrow I might have something different. I'm not certain, but I have decided to be fine with what I have.

## Morning Conversation

My words,  
    like oatmeal,  
    sit in bowls  
    waiting  
    for cream and sugar.

His words,  
    two crisp strips  
    of bacon,  
    drain  
    on paper towels.



Divorced at 1:00 a.m.

The phone wakes me  
out of just-sound sleep.  
I know it is you.  
I wait for more  
rings, finally answer  
as if I don't know  
who would call me  
in the night. Your drunken  
voice whispers distantly  
in my ear. You,  
having turned from her  
ear, tell me of the  
fight you had, of how  
she will not fight  
with words. You call  
wanting a voice  
to fight with. Now I  
have nothing to say.

Months later I  
have stopped answering  
late night calls. I hear  
you at my bedroom  
window, knocking loudly,  
forcefully. At first  
I'm afraid it is  
a stranger. Then I know  
it is you. I pretend not  
to hear. You call my  
name over and over.  
Finally I give in. I call  
back, afraid that you  
will enter my bedroom,  
use me up in one  
night. I wait  
until you knock again,  
this time, at the door,  
your voice drunk  
and loud. Wrapped

in my blue comforter,  
I let you in, lead you  
to the kitchen, fill you  
with more beer. You fall  
asleep on the floor  
until morning.

Now you have moved,  
live in Ohio. Still,  
every few weeks, the phone  
rings. You wait on the end  
of the line, knowing  
I will answer. I know  
the phone will keep  
ringing. I wake up  
slowly. You are silent  
when I answer. Then  
you whisper drunkenly how  
you are lonely, how  
you don't expect to be  
happy, how, when you pay  
off your debts, you will be  
finished. I have stopped  
giving you reasons  
to go on.

## Motherwords

She would start a letter. Then she would start it again. “I was afraid to send it,” she would say, having never finished the letter. “I was afraid something would go wrong.” My mother seldom sent letters. I received fewer than a dozen letters in forty-six years. She used the telephone incessantly, calling me as if I were in the next room, with as little introduction. She called when it suited a whim: after she’d read an article in the Kansas City Star, when someone she liked was on television, when she had a new recipe to share, even in the middle of trying a recipe. “I’m soaking chicken breasts in tarragon vinegar,” she would say. “Nancy Reagan eats this and look how skinny she is.” She would call again when the chicken had baked. “It tastes good, kind of tart.” And then again the next day. “It keeps well. I think I like it better cold. Nancy eats it cold.”

She was never alone when she had the telephone, but writing letters was lonely work, and committed her to a single set of events, “a done deal” that couldn’t be altered like conversation. Once she sent a letter to my father when he was in the mental hospital in Vinita. She wasn’t allowed to call so her contact was restricted to weekend visits and letters. Loneliness and worry drove her to reach out through written words. She wanted to reassure him. Bill was at college doing fine. John made good grades. I, at eight, was happy. That’s what she told him. She was doing fine too. And she missed him. She could say that in a letter. They told stories

sometimes about writing letters to each other years before, when dad worked and lived in Venezuela. She had saved his letters because they were so beautiful. I found a few in boxes stowed away in her closet after he died. They talked about Venezuelan beaches and love and loneliness. I never found any of her letters. He evidently had not saved them or transported them back to Oklahoma in his suitcases.

But she wrote to him in the hospital and mailed the letter on her way to work, mailed it so she couldn't retrieve it. Within hours her older sister called: "Mama's in the hospital. It's her heart." I didn't know any of this until I got home from school. The suitcases were packed and in the middle of the living room floor, the braided rag rug a tornado leading to some evident emergency. Mom was on the phone getting updates. She paced and smoked. We waited for my brother to get home from his job at a men's clothing store. Mom didn't drive. All the time she said to me, to whoever was on the other end of the phone, to my brother as he drove the winding roads to Kansas, "If I hadn't sent that letter. . . I told him everything was fine. I shouldn'ta said that." A sabotage. Her written words had doomed her. She couldn't chuckle or deny her words superstitiously to ward off the curse cast by the prankster gods of sent letters. Now her words were lies. She would have to take them back. All reassurances cancelled.

The only letters I remember receiving from her contained almost no information. Once she wrote me while I was teaching in England, telling me simply

to call her when I got the chance. The letter had arrived at my destination before I did. When I called she seemed relieved, saying she was afraid I wouldn't get there, perhaps afraid of the letter's curse. Any others contained photographs, or recipes, or newspaper clippings. The notes simply explained what the contents were. She saved information for phone calls.

When she died, I inherited all of her purses. There were many, all styles and sizes. I hardly remember her carrying anything but various versions of a traditional black handbag. Those were a part of the inheritance as well as many boutique clutches and straw satchels that she must have carried occasionally or purchased in some flight of stylish fancy. Each purse contained a half-empty pill bottle or two, a couple of butane lighters, empty cigarette wrappers, and letters, letters that had never been mailed. Most weren't even finished. Some were letters of anger, writing one of us out of her asset-less will. She would ply guilt enumerating her many sacrifices and our abuse or neglect. Sometimes there would be three or four letters, variations on a single, angry theme, in one purse. A few of the letters were sad, words recorded as last testaments to a life that had disappointed her, a life she had given up on. They weren't suicide notes, but acceptance letters. She had come to terms with her fate. Children had moved on, visited infrequently, husbands had come and gone leaving her alone. Other letters were effusive notes to her children and grandchildren, telling us how we were what she lived for, all that she lived for. None of these letters were signed but were scrawled in her loose, emotional script and folded as if finished.

My mother kept no diary that I know of. All we really have are memories of the words that resonated through the telephone exuding her staccato energy. Often it seemed as if I just picked up the phone to join her steady stream of words:

Hi honey it's me I thought I'd

Hi . . .

call I'm fixing pork chops it's a new  
recipe just take four pork chops and  
pound in two tablespoons of

Mom, I don't  
have a  
pencil . . .

flour it's in Southern Living did you  
read it yet it has the best  
recipes this month do you have  
your copy do you want another  
subscription this  
Christmas? John called he's fine  
He said you talked he's really

Sure . . .

Yeah, we . . .

tired he works too hard I  
didn't mean to bother you

No, it's fine  
I was just . . .

but I did want to tell you about  
that recipe.

Thanks  
Me too.

I love you.

Bye

15 to 17

Hello.  
What? Hi. Can I  
call you back?  
I have  
company . . .

Don't bother it was nothing  
I just had something that could  
Help you John might

Go ahead . . .

have scarred himself for life

15 to 17

John went to a soccer game and  
stayed out in the sun and burned  
his right hand and he might be  
scarred for life so the doctor  
said 15 to 17 sunscreen would  
help and you know how  
sensitive your skin  
is but I don't mean to  
bother you I just thought  
you'd want to know go on  
talk to your  
company it was nothing.

Bye.

I should never  
have moved next door to  
my own sister she

is selfish she has always  
been selfish and I was  
stupid to think  
she might be different

The same old thing she  
doesn't see past  
her own nose she  
just

I know she made fun  
of me at the hospital  
auxiliary they don't talk  
to me anymore I wish  
I'd never moved here

What?

15 to 17 what  
Mom?

Mom . . .

Hi, mom.

What happened?

What happened  
Mom?

she

oh, it's just Vada she'll  
never change I should have  
known I'll talk  
to you later I'm fixing  
dinner now.

Bye.

Mary, Vada's in the  
hospital it's her colon cancer and  
I don't think she'll make it  
this time can you get to  
Kansas City she  
needs us to be there we're  
driving up tonight

I have to get things ready the  
dog is such a hassle I'll  
never have another dog  
Bye.

She's at St. Luke's Hospital  
Bye

Hi just thought I'd call  
to see how you're  
doing Vada's fine she  
just has to slow down she'll  
never change  
I talked to John he's fine  
he works too hard he  
just got back from  
Hawaii oh do you know  
that kind of casserole dish that's  
pink inside sort of a  
salmon color it's a kind of  
crockery I saw it in the  
Spiegel catalog will you  
look in Kansas City

Mom, I'm sure

didn't

Wait . . . When?

Sure, Where will  
she . . .

Wait . . .

Okay.

Hi.  
How's Vada?



when you go over next  
time I'm fixing chicken  
it's a new recipe I'll  
have to give it to you just . . .  
there's  
  
door.

Oh, it's nothing.  
I love you.

Bye.

Mom, I think  
  
someone at the  
  
I'll talk to you  
later.  
  
Me too.

## FACES

I watch my friends as their sun faces transform into luminous moons, silvered by time, reflecting life. Poor vision grants us permission to ignore crevices carved by pain and poor choices. We smile cordially and age together.

I recall my mother's young face in a photograph, captured during WWII, by a pharmacist who had set up shop behind his drug store, creating memories of home and hope for the boys on the front lines. My mother served as his rehearsal. Her man stayed home to work on a government project, serving as bookkeeper for the team that created the aerosol bomb. He carried her presence to work each day, in the smell of his clean shirts, the taste of his breakfast bacon. There was no need for replicas. Still, she kept the photograph, a stunning image. She had a welcoming face, a smile that posed authentically. She believed the camera was friendly.

Forty years later she makes another photo, a gift to her children for when she is gone. She wears the same smile, pulled out of a drawer. She practices for weeks, in front of the mirror, for this one moment, tucking her broad grin into sagging cheeks. Her tired eyes try hard to join the accomplished lips. It is an adequate, but not a perfect, palimpsest.

## Driving My Mother Back to Kansas

The April morning my mother and I returned to Kansas was warm. The humidity intensified the city exhaust smells, even in the posh suburbs where I sat in my brother's driveway. I was behind the wheel of my blue Corolla, bags tossed in the back, with candy wrappers, sacks, cassette remnants, old newspapers, all the traveling gear that had gotten me to Dallas in the first place. My mother was in the seat next to me. My mother, reduced to ashes, was in a heavy plastic container, protected by cardboard, her name written on the top as if for mailing: Dorothy Lacey, Wilson County Cemetery, Fredonia, Kansas. I had agreed to drive her back home, back to be buried between both of her husbands. I would meet the rest of my family, my husband, brothers, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, in-laws and, what our family always called outlaws, long-time friends, at the motel on the outskirts of Fredonia. There we would finish planning the simple service my mother demanded. There we would gather and make sense of this death, crying about the loss of her vibrant, intrusive voice, laughing about the outrageous words her voice uttered. But for the next eight hours I would have my mother to myself. It was a given that I would drive her back. I had abdicated my duties earlier, sending her to Dallas to receive her cancer treatment, to Dallas to spend her last days with my brothers. They nursed her to her death but it was my turn again to take care of her. We had spent years alone together, protecting each other, when I was too young and she was too depressed for

us to be very successful. This last journey together was my chance to reassure her, and I wanted to take her home.

My mother had rarely traveled as a young woman except to participate in dance contests in the small towns of southeast Kansas. She left home at twenty-one to work in Colorado, to stay with her brother while she gave birth to my oldest brother on her own. Then she came back home to her parents in Kansas. Her father was an abiding and tolerant observer, fifty-seven at the time of my mother's birth, her mother, a hard-working self-taught nurse and cook, working at whatever paid the bills. Seventeen years younger than her husband, she earned their living when he became old. Times were always rough for my mother financially and travel was never in the lexicon of her dreams. After marriage to my father on Pearl Harbor Day, and the birth of a second son, she traveled to Kansas City, Missouri and Hammond, Indiana, workplaces where she found herself in tiny apartments taking care of small children while her husband, a wry and intelligent man, drank just a little too much with his friends and kept books for upstart construction companies. Cooking became her way of traveling as she befriended immigrant neighbors and integrated the cooking of Hungary and Mexico into our family traditions. She returned to her parents once again when my father sought work and excitement in Venezuela in the late forties. I have never gotten the full story of that job – more money, a need for some distance, who knows, but Mom stayed home and dad spent a year in South America as an accountant for an oil company. Years later I found a box of his letters

in their bedroom closet. Whatever the reason he went abroad, there was no doubt in those letters that he missed my mother. An articulate man with a verbal talent for romance, he made love to her on page upon page of thin airmail parchment. My father was known for his elegant script, always nagging my brothers to take classes in penmanship to correct their messy hands, so the words formed fairy tales for a nine year old who longed to hear her father speak.

Mom stayed home weaving her way through loneliness until my father returned in 1948 and the family decided to move together to Oklahoma where Dad took a job with Phillips Petroleum Company. Bartlesville was a company town and my family settled into a rented house to forge an ordinary post-war life. As part of this home-making, my father wanted another child. My mother had parented alone for a good long time, and had ushered my father home from bars for almost a decade, so she posed a bargain that she would have another child only if he gave up drinking. He accepted the bargain and, with the help of an old friend, Waldo Driscoll, he walked his way to sobriety and I was conceived soon after, entering life in September of 1950. Mom traded dad's drinking for his business trips, still minding the home front while he explored albeit corporate America. My father found himself flying to New York, San Francisco, Houston, and even such exotic oil hubs as Midland and Odessa, Texas. At home, in addition to caring for us, Mom provided after-school care for several other children to add to the family income. I was oblivious to the load she carried. I found his trips exciting, raking in lovely presents from each of his destinations. I recall meeting him at the door, whatever time of night, greedily

demanding my loot. We went on two family vacations, one, when I was too young to remember – a visit to my father’s sister in south Texas – and another, when I was four, to visit my aunt and uncle in Omaha. Otherwise, we stayed home, watched little league baseball and melted into Oklahoma summers. My dad became ill just after the trip to Omaha and all other trips any of us took for the next six years were to hospitals around the Midwest.

My mother often talked about travel, pored over magazine pictures of castles and country houses, fascinated by history and its remains. She was a woman of strong imagination, surviving most of her adult life through the fantasies she was able to construct from her avid reading. So when my father died the summer before my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, and my mother and I walked around our neighborhood more evenings than we could stand, she got it in her head that we should take a trip on the money that was already promised to six years of debt. We went to Colorado, first to Pueblo and then to Denver. This trip was anchored to the houses of friends and relatives but our miserable plight brought out the generosity in both of our hosts and, for the first time, perhaps in both of our lives, we acted as tourists. We rode a crowded Greyhound to Pueblo, spent two weeks going up and down mountains, visiting every reconstructed goldmine in the state, tramped up Pike’s Peak and bought a Viewmaster as a souvenir, complete with disks of the Royal Gorge and The Garden of the Gods, two of my favorite spots on our fantasy tour. Each day was an excursion, finished off by cocktails at our friends’ house. My mom tried margaritas,

martinis, daiquiris, ending each night a little tipsy, a little less exhausted than the day before. We spent a final week in Denver where we did some touring and lots of talking to my mother's niece, a niece whose life represented all that my mother had wanted. Donna was married to an aerospace engineer, had a precocious daughter and was expecting her second child very soon. She made wonderful dinners after which we sat in their fashionable contemporary living room and readied ourselves to go home to a life that looked nothing like the one we were borrowing. Even our trip home continued the fantasy as we splurged and reserved a private compartment on the train. We spent the evening of the trip in the dining car chatting with a banker from Connecticut and his teenage granddaughter who was returning to New York from summer camp, and watched the scenery pass like a movie screen. Late that night as we neared Kansas City, I lay on the top bunk of our tiny room, rocked into slumber. I realized that movement was the one thing I could count on to make me calm not only within myself but in my relationship with my mother.

My mom and I didn't take any more exotic – Colorado was exotic in our life – trips over the next years. We drove to Dallas frequently to see my brother John who had moved there after college. We went to visit after the birth of his children, when he bought new houses. We went to Indiana on a marathon Christmas trip to see my brother Bill and his family and then more often to Dallas when both brothers lived there. I went off to college, moved to Colorado for a while, still mesmerized by the childhood memories – she visited twice. My mother took the biggest trip of her life when she visited Bill in Germany where he had a government post. Bill understood

my mother's love of history and introduced her to castles, food, monuments and people, invoking every fantasy she had conjured up over sixty years of imagining. When I look back at pictures of her in Germany, I see a joy that transcended the usual broad masquerading smile that she wore through her hard times. More than anything, that trip gave my mother conversation for years after and a sense that she had lived a life closer to the one we pretended to live in Denver on the trip that moderated our grief.

While my mother and I didn't travel far or explore much of the world together, we had learned on that train back from Denver that movement kept us close and allowed us the personal distance we needed to remain so. Nothing helped our conversations more than keeping busy and focusing on something other than our own or each others' faults. We took short trips in the car to see friends or relatives, often spur-of-the-moment jaunts when we couldn't bear to look at each other and worry what the other was thinking. We visited my Aunt Vera, who lived sixty miles away in my mother's home town, on many a weekend that our house was too cluttered to clean and the walls were collapsing around us. We walked around shopping malls in Tulsa when Mom got the nerve to drive into the city. We even drove around the neighborhoods we knew, checking out burgeoning suburbs filled with crisp, boring split-level houses that tempted us by their cleanliness, finally ending up at Tastee Freeze or Lotta Burger, eating in the car like we were on the road. We toured the ordinary and avoided the tension of static conversation. When my mother married again, a man who worked for the highway department, she kept moving and the two



of them drove around together for eighteen years until he dropped dead of a heart attack on one of the rare evenings they stayed still at home.

The last few years of my mother's life, she didn't travel much. She made a few trips to our house and visited my brothers in Dallas, met up with her brother and his wife, from time to time. But her life had slowed down. A woman of many words and the energy to sustain simultaneous conversation, she spent much of her time on the phone, traveling in voice if not in body. One summer she helped me refinish some furniture as I readied my graduate student apartment furnishings for a real house. She wore herself out and we were far too enclosed in my apartment to tolerate each other. I would find myself hiding in the bathroom to get away from her words. We finished the week by driving to Dallas where I went to pick up some more furniture, hand-me-downs from my upscale, upstyle brother. Once we got in the car, our relationship relaxed. Tensions from an argument the night before (I thought she didn't take my work seriously) melted as she brought out a little notepad she had purchased to write down exactly what I did in my research. I have no idea what she did with that notebook but I suspect she read the notes to various relatives as she called them on the phone and informed them of her daughter's accomplishments. She bragged about us regularly, and was more excited about the conversations if she had real information she had obtained through personal contact. She was a lonely woman who needed to see her kids once in a while. We didn't always oblige, didn't always have the time to travel the distance. We just relied on the predictable phone calls to keep us in touch.

When my mother called to tell me about the bleeding, the pain, and ultimately of her local doctor's prediction of cancer, I was frightened. I was partly frightened of losing her, of the reality that she would actually die. She wasn't the sort of woman that telegraphed impending death. Her inordinate energy allowed for the pretense of immortality. But I was also afraid of what it meant to me at that time. My husband was ill, depressed we thought, but not functioning very well. As an antidote to my mother's loquaciousness, I refused to tell people anything, prizing my secrecy as some means of emotional control. So when she needed me, she also had no idea that someone else did as well. Her doctor had suggested a hospital in Kansas City. She could be close to home, close to her siblings, all too old to care for her. She was the baby of her family and they too had imagined her immortal, or certainly longer-lasting than they were. But mostly she would be close to me. I could drive the thirty miles to the hospital each day, talk to the doctors, a specialty I had perfected out of experience, and explain everything to the rest of the family. I could be with my mother as I had been with her through all of our lives, sharing our sense that our lives rarely matched up with our hopes. But this time I couldn't take care of her and I spent two days making sure she could go to Dallas, arranging her care so that I could escape the responsibility and acquire the guilt. Mom went willingly, pleased in some ways that her sons were happy to care for her.

Mom traveled to Dallas via Lawrence, stopping off at our house to have a quasi-birthday dinner before I took her to the airport the next day. When she arrived, she looked years older than she had two months before, when I had driven to her

house for a Sunday dinner. Still, she was upbeat and offered the verbal energy that was her standard. It was energy enough that she either ignored my husband's distractedness or was adequately self-absorbed to get through the meal on pleasant conversation. Pleasant conversations were not always my mother's fare. Guided by her emotions, she translated those emotions to words that rarely attacked outright but certainly applied guilt and pain to anyone who might have hurt her. She was, for much of her life, a disappointed woman, who used her energy as best she could to counter the disappointment. It wasn't dissatisfaction but loss that caused her disappointment. She loved her husbands, her first as her lover, her second as a warm and benevolent companion. She loved her children and feared losing them. Her intensity was so great that it drove us all away at one time or another and so strong that it pulled us back in when we forgot the pain her sadness could emit. She kept us close through the regular phone calls, disguising her need for love by providing us information she had gleaned from relatives, newspapers, books of all kinds. A few years before her death I became savvy to this ploy and began to buy her biographies I wanted to read but knew I would never get to. Phone calls were my Readers Digests to famous lives. And it was, appropriately, on the phone that she led me through the symptoms of her illness and that I organized her plans to go to Dallas. Her stopover at my house was what she termed a good-bye, despite the doctors' positive prognoses. But unlike other times, when she threatened death to keep us close, these promises of death were calm and accepting. And I felt some duty to accept her resignation as well. That last evening, after we finished up a bottle of wine and a new chicken dish I

prepared as an homage to her love of new recipes, we sat down on the couch to talk. Within a few minutes she was dozing off, the energy spent. As I woke her to go upstairs, I knew the conversation was unnecessary.

We met my aunt and uncle at the airport the next morning. Married some sixty years, they were still driving around to nearby diners for Sunday dinner. That Sunday they came to the airport to see my mother. Frank was my mother's brother, the big guy with the big heart. He and Dora had fallen in love on their first date and bided their time for six months before her father let them marry. They had no children but spent their lives caring about everyone in both of their families. Dora, who was famous in our family for a giddy laugh, was just sad that morning, barely able to look at my mother. We talked little, mostly about weather and the crops Dora's brothers farmed. Then mom picked up her bags and went into the restricted area, calling a halt to all that sadness. She waved broadly at us from inside, smiling as if she were headed for Europe. I didn't see her again.

For the next two weeks she met with doctors upon doctors, found out she had suffered a heart attack some years back but hadn't known, not the kind of suffering she imagined a heart attack would cause. She received more lectures about smoking than she could bear. That's what I heard about. Each time she got the lecture, she would call me as if I supported the habit that had infiltrated my whole life second-hand. But in a way she was right. Her anxieties had always been calmed by smoking and she had reached seventy-seven, outlived both her husbands, and was now

“watching everyone else live.” The cigarette caveats seemed irrelevant if diagnostically correct.

She had bladder cancer. The lungs were clear. The cancer had, in my mother’s words, skipped the rest of her and worked its way all the way down to her bladder. The doctors could operate. I spent the week beforehand wavering about going to be with her during the surgery. I didn’t go. The doctors said she would be fine. Surgery was on Tuesday. We talked the following Thursday afternoon and she seemed more energetic than she had in months. She liked the one doctor, she said. Just the one. I got rundowns on nurses, patients, machines. Her voice had returned. She could stay with me in Lawrence when she was well enough to travel. She would go to Bill’s for a while, have her follow-up appointments with the doctor, the one she liked. She said other things too. But she was back and I listened off and on as I always had, the repetitions, the uncensored thoughts, the details that seemed insignificant. I finally said I had to go. So did she, she told me. More tests. “Send me that chicken recipe, the one you fixed for my birthday,” she called out as I was putting down the receiver.

The positive prognosis took a turn. After what the doctor deemed successful surgery, my mother left the hospital and went to sleep at my brother’s house. He found her the next morning. I had to travel to Dallas alone.

I reached my brother John’s house sometime early in the morning. He and my sister-in-law were up and sitting at the kitchen table. The room was pale, filled with an atmosphere that hadn’t been slept in. We spent the next hour going over the death,

the unexpectedness of it, ultimately how peaceful it surely was. By six I called my other brother and the plans began. She had already paid for cremation through the mortuary in her home town. We had to get the information from him about how to proceed. We had to find a crematorium. We had to call more and more people. Business overtook us. It was good I had a car. I began to imagine and construct her funeral. Nothing fancy, no sermons, just a grave-side service would be fine, she had always insisted. I needed more, not much more, but something that reminded us of her. I framed photographs I found at my brothers' houses and called Fredonia to set a time and place for us to gather. Something like a wake would be appropriate. We made more phone calls to let people know. By Tuesday afternoon my mother's body had been cremated in a crematorium in Oak Cliff, a rough, uneasy area of Dallas. I had a car, my brother Bill had directions to get there, and we had his grandson, whom we secured in the backseat. I insisted that Bill drive. I hated driving in Dallas even when I knew where I was going. My mother's death had not registered for any of us. My brother John seemed dazed. Bill like me seemed perpetually on edge. My nephew's presence helped us stay superficially well-behaved. The drive to Oak Cliff was convoluted. Dallas driving is never simple and on this particular afternoon the roads were congested and chaotic. By the time Bill exited the last highway ramp into the residential neighborhoods, the tension in the car was palpable. I rode that edge between crying and screaming. I fidgeted with the radio, the paperwork for the crematorium, my mother's purse, which held her identification information. As I sorted through her purse, I found a bottle of pills. These pills were my mother's

safety valve. For as long as I can remember, she had kept a bottle of Librium, little green and black capsules, in her purse, just in case. When she couldn't get away to smoke, she would take a Librium. When life just got too hard, she would take a Librium. When anyone else was going through a rough time, she would offer a Librium. Those pills got us through my father's death, my brothers' illnesses, and many times when we could hardly pay the bills. She didn't take them often but she always had them with her. I pulled the bottle out of my purse and showed Bill. We both smiled. I popped open the bottle, handed him one pill and took one for myself. We each took a swig from a soft drink bottle left over from my trip and settled in to wait for the effect. The streets were clogged with pedestrians from some parade or festival or general hubbub. We spent half our time on the streets of Oak Cliff idled at lights, or directed through side streets. But the pills had eased our tension and we began to tolerate the journey despite its complications. While Bill paid attention to his driving, I looked back at my nephew who had, between pills and traffic, disappeared from my consciousness. He was gurgling happily, decorated from head to toe with cassette tape. He had found the bag of tapes I carried around in my car and proceeded to unravel the dozen or so cassettes inside. The likes of Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughn were transformed into teething toys. At first frustrated, I gave way to laughter as did my brother and we left Roman to wear his new celluloid duds until we arrived at the crematorium.

Making our way through multiple detours, we arrived at a small storefront marked Oak Cliff Crematorium. We entered a dimly lit waiting room with aged

linoleum floors. A woman sat behind a desk. We showed her the papers and she asked us to wait. It all seemed so standard, so simple. Just a few minutes later a tall, African-American man walked out from the back holding what looked like a cardboard box, about a ten inch cube. He greeted us, offered gentle condolences, and held the box out for one of us to take. It seemed a full minute before I realized that I would be the one to hold it. I've never talked to Bill about that minute, about who should hold her in that dimly lit room. But he had borne her dying. I needed to carry her home. The box was still almost too hot to touch. It was heavy, densely compacted so that there was no movement or give. I pulled the box close to me to protect it, to protect my hands from the heat. I held her on my lap all the way back to his house.

As I pulled out of John's driveway and headed for the interstate, I remembered all the times my mother had driven the same roads, leaned forward into the steering wheel to keep firm control, control she had not ever taken until the age of 43. After my dad died, my brother Bill taught her to drive on her brand new beige Rambler American. "It won't show dirt," she explained of the permanently dingy car. I, too, learned to drive on that same car, "her car," she insisted every time I took the wheel. But she was not a backseat driver. I learned to concentrate not to avoid her criticism but as a means of blocking out her constant conversation. On this April morning no radio station could block out the stored conversations in my brain, conversations that compensated easily for the silence of the box sitting next to me.



We drove quickly through Texas, southern Oklahoma. For most of that road on our regular visits, we were unobservant, either, eager to reach Dallas, sprinting past the sights, or headed home with little concern for the morning activity we usually faced on early departures. Our first real stop was Atoka, a small town that exists in my mind only as the Grayhound bus lunch stop. Before my mom learned to drive we would ride the bus from Bartlesville to Dallas, schlepping boxes and suitcases among old women and military recruits. The bus would take a thirty minute break for us to go through a line, grab pre-wrapped sandwiches, chips, and Jell-o. Once mom started driving we continued to stop there, a monument to our earlier travels. The food was never good, never fresh but the taste was nostalgic. I stopped again that day, realizing that I couldn't take mom into the restaurant, couldn't comfortably leave her unattended. I finally covered her with the blanket I kept in the back seat, hurried in to the restaurant, grabbed chips and a coke and drove on. Before I pulled out of the parking lot, I opened mom's purse and got another Librium to calm me while the conversations continued. Her voice filled my brain, blurts of news, rants, chatter, no coherent thread, just words, words, words from my mother. The box seemed still.

When we reached northern Oklahoma the memories blended with the words. We hit Tulsa, where we spent nearly every weekend of my childhood, one hospital or another, this diagnosis or that, cure or no cure. I pulled off Highway 75 onto Utica Avenue, a name I remembered only because of the shopping center nearby. I sat for years and years at the Walgreens store, drinking vanilla cokes and waiting for someone to take me back to the hospitals. My dad was in two hospitals on that street

– St. Johns and Hillcrest, the latter providing the last surgery, the final diagnosis.

During those hospital stays, my mother and I spent every weekend in Tulsa, hitching rides with friends or relatives, riding the bus. Some weekends we stayed overnight at the Hotel Tulsa, a drab brick downtown hotel that even in 1960 seemed out of another era. The employees would regale us with stories about famous people who had stayed there in the day, how J. Paul Getty had left a hundred dollar tip for an order of pancakes. After a long day at the hospital, where I wandered the lobby or sat across the street at the Walgreen's, we would take a cab or the city bus, depending on how tired my mother's feet were. We would eat hamburgers at the diner next door to the hotel, and fill our clothes with the odors of grease and onions, odors that stayed with us the whole next day in the sterile hospitals. Back at the hotel my mother would go to the bar while I rode up and down the elevator with the  $\frac{3}{4}$  Cherokee elevator operator named Cherie. Each weekend was the same and I looked forward to every minute of the sameness.

As I drove past the hospitals – both updated, expanded, but the same really, one Catholic, secretive, sacred, the other corporate, sterile, analytical – I imagined my mother's tired voice, her hopeful questions, her constant loneliness despite her incessant talking. I drove on, to the shopping center, which had been updated as well, gone upscale and posh, the Walgreen's long replaced by a wine bar and a boutique. I meandered through the streets until I found downtown, or what used to be downtown. The Hotel Tulsa, the diner, the entire street of buildings where we spent our weekends had been replaced by a bank, a civic center and a nondescript mall, their storied past

imploded into concrete. From there, I relocated Highway 75 and ventured onward toward Kansas.

I turned onto the Cooper Ranch road, so called because of a beautiful ranch of that name, large elegant barns enclosed by white fencing. The ranch appeared halfway between Tulsa and Bartlesville and I drove imagining myself in the backseat of a car, marking the miles, as I had so many times as a kid. Sometimes I read or played car bingo or simply peopled the drive with my own stories. On this day I saw the road through the window of our past, remembering days that mom talked to dad about his illness, days that my brother Bill talked of getting married, days when my brother John learned to drive. Medical commuters, we planned our lives on that road, built our family conversations on time in the car rather than time at the dinner table, a ritual that had been the center of our family before my father's illness circumvented our lives. As I turned the corner past the ranch, I could see Bartlesville ahead, a strange corporate town with giant skyscrapers bursting from an ordinary town, a would-be Dallas with no suburbs. When I was a child, Bartlesville had resonated wealth and modernity. Frank Phillips, the founder of Phillips Petroleum Company proclaimed himself patron of the town, giving silver dollars for Christmas to all the elementary school children and literally whitewashing the bad side of town. We entered Bartlesville via Frank Phillips Boulevard and headed toward downtown. The cityscape was still balanced between three tall corporate buildings belonging to Phillips and a tiny skyscraper, The Price Tower, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, home to a pipeline company and several tiny elegant offices. All of these buildings

seemed the same as before but around them now were empty storefronts and demolished houses. The four blocks of upmarket clothing stores for both men and women during the fifties had been replaced by antique malls and curio shops. The eighties had been hard on Bartlesville, threatened by corporate takeovers and unable to provide the old oil glory of Tulsa, only half an hour away. I drove on past my schools, toward my old neighborhood to find open yard and construction rigs. Big houses on tree-lined streets were replaced with commercial prefab buildings on grassless lots. Like Tulsa, downtown had moved and exchanged itself for concrete and emptiness. As I drove through the streets I once again heard my mother's voice, this time not as an exhausted wife or an aging widow, but as a young woman, chatting with her friend Jo Carmen over coffee, asking our neighborhood grocer to order hominy grits or Hungarian paprika because she had a recipe she wanted to try. Her energy filled those spaces and I imagined her whole and young and untouched by the illnesses and bad luck that tarnished her womanhood. I remembered her face, the face in a photo I carried that day in my suitcase, of a wide-open, unconscious smile. It was a face from before my birth but a face I remember seeing when she heard a good jitterbug on the phonograph or saw a new baby toddling around or tasted something new and exotic that she had never even imagined. She wore that smile for her whole life but most of the time it was empty, her tired eyes betraying the wide grin. But there were moments on these streets, the streets that seemed empty and lifeless now, when my mother was filled with life and shared it generously.

Bartlesville felt like a ghost town too far back to be real, but too familiar to visit as an outsider. As I turned back onto Highway 75, my mother secured on the seat beside me, I headed toward our last home together sixty miles north. My mother had grown up in Neodesha, Kansas, and her family had lived in Wilson County for over a hundred years. My mother was the youngest child and was the one who always returned to see her family and her roots. She took me with her to live there after we could no longer make ends meet, as she would say, in upscale Bartlesville. In Neodesha, my Bartlesville clothes were stylish and avant-garde, products of the retail discounts we received from the stores where my mother worked. I was years ahead in school and, despite my skepticism about moving as a junior in high school, found myself relaxing into myself in the palm of this tiny community. Like Bartlesville, the financial center was oil, but in this case a Standard Oil Refinery that yoked engineers with laborers, who along with farmers provided a more diverse and practical student body at the local high school. My penchants for reading and drawing were considered a little hoity-toity and I received my fair share of mockery. A new girl, I pleased the boys who had known all the other girls since kindergarten and annoyed the girls because I hadn't been there since kindergarten. My mother and I shared an apartment above the Self-Service Grocery Store. It had been previously inhabited by an "artist" who was fond of multi-colored walls – purple, orange, black – an odd match for our Ethan Allen early American maple furniture. My aunt and cousin lived a few blocks away offering my mother both friendship and hostility, as family often does. Still, she seemed more herself in this town, more able to battle the

loneliness. Never a woman who relished all-female clubs, she found her friendships at the local V.F.W. where couples and other single women gathered on Friday and Saturday nights for mixed drinks and dancing. She had known these people all her life, lived through WWII with them, kept in touch on regular visits back. She knew them better than most of the people in Bartlesville, where she was consumed with motherhood and my father's illness for most of her years there. Neodesha brought back her youth in the form of old friends and familiar surroundings.

As I drove across the bridge into Neodesha, I passed the fairgrounds, which evoked memories of the A & H fair where farm met town every August. Everyone gathered on the hottest weekend of the year to watch tractor pulls and softball games. Cheap carnival acts filled in the spaces between the field and the exhibitions. My mother and I went every year even before we moved to Neodesha. It was there that I met all of my mother's old school friends and their children. When we moved, I became a part of a world that my mother took for granted. The smell of the fair – manure, popcorn, engine smoke – lingered in my memory with summer romances and sultry weather. Neodesha provided us a home where neither of us had to try so hard. After years of trying to hold things together, my mother was tired. She found rest for herself and, by resting, enabled me to relax, to be a kid in some 1950's sort of way. There were plenty of problems in that small Kansas town, but I chose to live the movie version, immersing myself into school activities, embracing football games and drama clubs alike, showing off in ways that I never had the confidence to do before, while my mother found solace at the bar. No one in Neodesha cared. She

was one of theirs and I became one of theirs too, despite the hesitation of skeptical teenage girls. After a year, I was absorbed into the ebb and flow of town life just like my mother had been years before.

I drove the square, as we always did, eighth past the high school, Tank Street past the swimming pool, 4<sup>th</sup> Street past Ralph Vandever's farm, turning past snake park and in front of the library and the "girl scout little house", then to Main, U.S. 75, past the Green Lantern Restaurant, serving the worst food and the best coffee in southeast Kansas, past the Rexall drug store where I counted pills and Hallmark cards every summer and Christmas holiday through college, and on past the fairgrounds one more time as I headed for Fredonia. I have a different home now and can never return to Neodesha with any of the same feeling I had that day, driving with my mother through her home, seeing it through her eyes and knowing that it gave her another thirty years of life by going back, when she had pretty much given up on everything.

It was only sixteen miles between Neodesha and Fredonia. Two towns in the same county. Neodesha was the working-class stepchild with decent paying jobs; Fredonia combined the sallow dust of the cement company with old wealth, big houses and a beautiful courthouse until they tore it down in the sixties to update with glass and brick. The rivalry was always palpable but the interrelationships between families kept the two communities tied together. My grandmother had lived in Fredonia as an old woman and all of my mother's family ended up in the Fredonia cemetery. We never discussed any reasons for it. Spread across the acres of

tombstones was our family plot. Every year on “Decoration Day” my mother’s family would gather either at my uncle’s farm or at a nearby hotel after the farm was sold, and eat potluck, comfort food, talk through days and nights about family accolades and misdemeanors and, finally, on Monday morning, before everyone dispersed to their respective homes, decorate the graves of several generations of the Routh family. We would wander through the cemetery finding one grave in relation to another – “I think Grandpa Brown is farther north than Uncle John,” “Ralph is in the next row by that oak tree” – as each family member added his or her own favorite potted plant or bouquet. As a child I remember a glut of flowers and plants, plastic and real, strewn across and around the tombstones. Each year the flowers were fewer, the reunions smaller. But still there is something in all of us that drives us to that spot where my mother’s history penetrated us. On this day in April I was taking my mother, the person who created the connection for us, to be buried there, not in a fancy coffin but in a small box she had chosen for cost and simplicity. Before I took her to the mortuary, the one where most of my relatives had been dressed out for burial and lain in coffins, I drove through that cemetery and stopped at the grave of my father, whose flat stone, laid more than thirty years before, was worn and dusty. A space away was a newer grave, that of my stepfather, a lanky, calm man who drank mom’s energy like his coffee every day and offered her a life separate from her children’s, a life of her own. I took the box outside and sat for a while, holding it on my lap, knowing my relatives would be waiting and worrying at the hotel, knowing the mortician was expecting me to meet with my brothers to plan the service. We



would arrange music and eulogies, old gospel standards and funny stories if we were to please my mother. In the meantime, I sat with her, with her past and mine. The smoke from the cement plant next door blew across the cemetery and I remembered in silence. My mind became quiet. No more conversations. No voices. My mother had died.

## Reminders

1957

Why did you buy me this damn planter? I want personal gifts. No one ever buys me personal gifts.

1961

Why did Mrs. Stewart think you copied that drawing? Didn't you tell her that you drew it yourself? Doesn't she know you can draw?

1965

If he's not here in five more minutes you might as well change clothes and watch a movie with me.

1971

Go back to the apartment and get my earrings. They're on the dresser in the pink box. You'd better hurry if you want me to look right at your wedding.

1978

My daughter is a schoolteacher. She's really good with kids. She takes after me.

1985

So when did he start  
stepping out on you?

1987

I hope you finish  
that degree before  
I'm dead.

1988

You know how proud I am  
of you. I worship the ground  
you walk on, well, not the  
ground but you.

1989

I know I can't talk  
as well as you  
but you know  
what I mean.

## I Gave Back April

I gave back April  
when the jonquils  
died in bud.  
Yellow half-forms  
froze one night  
or morning.  
We didn't see it  
come,  
the cold  
the death.

I gave back April  
when the cancer  
surgery went  
just fine,  
no problems.  
I'll-be-home-  
on-Friday  
turned to death-  
on-Saturday.  
What seemed  
like sleep  
was not.

We never see through April.  
New growth  
obscures our view  
of endings.  
Faux joy.  
Odes on melancholy  
elevate  
the gloom,  
gloom that slows  
us down and  
prunes the foliage,  
gives us space  
to grow.

Poets thrive on April  
contradictions  
celebrating spring,  
how sadness  
brings us closer  
to the truth,  
deep, soaking  
penetrating truth.

I gave back April,  
tired of floods  
and evening.

### At Forty-Four

Like Lily Briscoe, come back  
to the house ten years  
after Mrs. Ramsay's death,  
I look at the absence  
my mother leaves on the vacant  
porch, listen for the missing ring  
of the telephone on Sunday  
mornings. I realize that mothers,  
and Mrs. Ramsays,  
and women like I am sometimes  
fill in the spaces left by failure.  
They (we) allow childhood  
to continue even after the wrinkles  
have cracked our porcelain faces,  
long after our potential  
has been drowned  
by caution or inaction.  
Mrs. Ramsay lets every Lily  
pretend that there is enough joy  
in the happiness of others  
to keep us alive,  
pretend that every decision,  
or lack of one, is temporary  
and without consequence.  
It might be fine  
to go to the lighthouse  
no matter what we do.

But even Mrs. Ramsey  
dies before the narrative  
ends, leaving Lily alone  
with her vision.  
Some of us awake at 44,  
Mrs. Ramsayless, motherless,  
and understand there is no  
lighthouse to get to.

## Photographic Memory

My husband died of Pick's Disease. I'd never heard of the disease before his diagnosis. It is rare, discovered in 1892 by a Czechoslovakian neurologist named Albert Pick. Like Alzheimer's it involves a loss of memory. The frontal lobes atrophy, erase the past erratically – words, images, obligations. It seemed like depression until that diagnosis just couldn't hold all he was doing or forgetting. The Friday in February that he showed up at his daughter's school in the middle of the lunch room for no reason, I had to take action. There had, of course, been hundreds of other signs that I rationalized into explanations. Erin's adolescent embarrassment masking fear motivated me out of denial.

After many phone calls I received permission to take him to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, a nationally renowned mental health facility. We went directly from pretending life was normal to immersion into mental illness. By seven o'clock that evening, I had checked him in for tests. It was one of the hardest nights of my life. The idea of leaving him there was hard enough. He had become dependent and I had become enabling as we danced denial through our academic lives. He had been an English professor and writer for thirty years; words had been his work and his leisure. Now he was confused and incoherent. I couldn't bear the pain he felt when he struggled through tasks that had been ordinary a year before, fumbled for words to explain. I graded his papers, organized his tests, edited and even wrote academic articles. He like I pretended into belief his ability to function.

When we arrived at the hospital the psychologists administered the regular admission tests – count backwards by threes, name the President. Every time they asked him a question, he asked a question back. It was his coping mechanism. He would laugh and evade. He could not count at all forwards or backwards. Numbers had flown from his brain except as markers of success. Until his death, he could recite the amount in his TIAA-CREF account and insisted on keeping the papers proving those numbers in his pocket. He knew the cost of our house. When we met new people, he asked me if I knew their salaries.

Tom spent one month in the hospital. Two psychiatrists, two psychologists, a neurologist, and a social worker administered his tests, pacing them for insurance purposes, giving us both a chance to understand what was happening. Over that time they read the books he had written, talked to him daily as they tried to figure out the person he had been and the person he had become. I visited every day, once I had been cleared as non-threatening to the environment of his building. It was a precarious world, filled with nervous people healing or waiting to heal. Mostly I sat with Tom, brought him donuts, candy, read poems that he still loved and repeated. Sometimes we joined the other patients in the lobby where they played Trivial Pursuit. Tom would sit with me amazed at my knowledge as I tossed off trivia. I sat amazed at his loss of it. The emotional distance between us shrank while our intellectual distance expanded.

By March we knew the final diagnosis. No cure. No clear sense of how long this disease would take to kill him. He would continue to get worse. The drug tacrin



might slow down the symptoms. But we had to watch his liver, its deterioration, a side effect of the drug. What good is a brain if the liver goes, they said. I thought the opposite. We were advised to run a tight ship. Life needed order, stability, repetition. And so we changed. His teenage daughter shortened her visits; we traded her lively chaos for loving politeness. That's what the doctors recommended. In reality it was hard for her to watch him die, to listen for his humor and miss it, to be growing intellectually while the person responsible for her wit was losing his. But despite prescriptions for order, disorder finds its place and keeps people alive. The year we had left he was blessed and cursed with surprises that could not be prescribed.

At first Tom liked simply walking around the house while I went to campus. He watched lots of television. A news junkie, he found the repetition of CNN valuable. Only crises disrupted his peaceful pacing and listening. The explosion at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City sent me running home because he imagined himself there in the midst of it. It was the beginning of a growing paranoia that accompanied his loss of some memories and recovery of other frightening ones from his past or his imagination.

It was difficult to talk about his illness to anyone. First of all, I was protective. When we went out socially, which we did for a time, I wanted him to feel okay. He refused to think of himself as ill until the last few months of his life. We continued to pretend as a couple but everyone outside knew he was on leave, had been in the hospital, and made a point of asking me about it. "Is it Alzheimer's?" our friends would say. Not exactly. "He's so young." "He seems fine now." "You

should stop sheltering him so much,” they would advise. He rose to occasions, calling up his graciousness, his smile when we went out. He enjoyed the attention. He would become nervous if I left his side, come looking for me. No one noticed that. No one knew his fear when I left him at home. Illness brings out well-meaning certainty from people who aren’t in charge. I found some relief on a British online discussion group. Most of the research for Pick’s Disease had been conducted in the U.K. at that point, and I found people in various stages of coping. I could see both my past and my future in the posts but still could not let go of my own real experience as I framed our life.

We ate dinner out almost every night. As the illness progressed, we limited the restaurants, visiting the same three or four where he knew the menu (pretending to read), and could find the restroom on his own. When he was comfortable he carried himself tall, almost arrogantly. In new places, his walk became the characteristic shuffle that took over completely in the last two or three months of his life. More than denial, it was masquerade that allowed him to pose as his inner self. Sometimes we read poems at night allowing words to return from the abyss where they had fallen during his lonely, silent days. Larkin, Hughes, Yeats: “Man is in love and love’s what vanishes. What more is there to say?”

By May words were hard, conversations were choppy. We fell into an ad hoc communication of touch and sight and instinct that enabled us to communicate together but not much with others. After we had maneuvered his daughter’s ninth grade graduation ceremony and begged off a formal luncheon that would have

enunciated his anxieties, we took a ride to the Kansas River, one of his favorite outings. Rides were a part of our daily routine and provided him sustenance. Tom, who had grown up in rural northern Illinois, the one hundred percent Irish child of a farmer, needed the open spaces that these drives provided. We lived near a reservoir that has not quite been swallowed up by the natural hillsides. We would park the car and walk down to the water, stroll around. Each evening we would wait for sunset, watching cloud formations and countless birds, coming and going amid their migrations. Our favorite events were the regular visits by the deer at dusk. He knew the spots where these events were most likely. As Tom led us on those walks he seemed strong, involved in his life. These drives were revitalizing and rehabilitating and pulled us out of the increasing difficulties of our days.

As we drove to the river that May afternoon, Tom kept putting his hands to his face, forming a little square around his eyes and saying, “That would be a good shot.” Some of these frames were of the river, the sandbars, old trucks, the sky, often the sky. I gave up asking what he meant. I knew he could see what he wanted. So I took a gamble. We drove to a local camera shop and I spent two hours, first finding a patient clerk who could help us find a camera and then judging as clearly and precisely as I could what camera he could actually use. The clerk we found was wonderful. The rest of the people in the shop watched with a mixture of pity and disgust as I demanded different cameras with specific capabilities – a zoom lens, an easy on/off button, automatic loading. But we found a small Olympus that he could use by the time we left the store. I bought a case of film and we loaded the camera

right there on the counter. As we headed to the car, Tom aimed his camera at the sky. By the time we were home, the roll of film was used up. He had never taken more than a snapshot or two in his life. Words were his medium and photos were either documentation for his writing or motivations to write. Inspired by photographers like Diane Arbus or prompted by newspaper clippings depicting real-life events, he knew the value of the image. And it was the language he could speak in this new phase of his life.

The purchase of the camera coincided with plans I was making for the summer. I had an administrative job at the university so my time off was limited. Tom was still okay to be alone during the days, but I knew those days were numbered. For years before the diagnosis, Tom had talked of Alaska. He was not a traditional outdoorsman in any sense. He hated camping or roughing it in any way, but he enjoyed wildlife and open spaces. He had traveled through Europe and Latin America but saw Alaska as something exotic and different. That spring he had returned to the topic, so in my usual way, I bought several books and we looked at them during the evenings. I had no idea how long Tom would be ill. I worried about money, about affording the care that his illness would demand. But I also knew instinctly that we needed to make good use of the time we had. I began searching for cruises up the inland passage through British Columbia and around the coast. During this time, Tom continued to take photographs. Every day when I came home from work, he would have two or three rolls of film ready for me to develop. Before the

convenience and immediacy of digital cameras, we spent a fortune at one-hour photo labs so he could appreciate his visions. It entered our daily routine as we dropped off the film, ate dinner at our favorite restaurants, and picked up the photos to admire at home. Sometimes I joined him with my camera. We had many parallel shots of doors and houses and landscapes. I would follow his lead and join in his visual admiration of objects I usually overlooked. Sometimes I would come home to surprises. He would wander the yard, the neighborhood during the days. He spent lots of time in a park near our house. By far the most common topic for Tom was the sky, cloudless, tumultuous, overcast. At sunrise, midday or sunset. Roll after roll of sky. I would ask him what he saw and he would simply nod at me, replying, "See it? See it?" In these moments I had to grope for the connection between us, looking for some concrete image, having no idea if that was his intention or not.

By July, as we prepared for the trip to Alaska, the cameras had become our most treasured accessories. I bought him a strong neck strap so he could wear the camera continually through our travels. I dreaded the idea of losing his final means of communication. We were booked on the Holland American Noordam, an old ship, small for the cruise line. Overwhelmed by the rest of my life, I used a travel agent and mentioned that Tom was ill, but gave no details. That, in retrospect, was a mistake. She could have made my life easier if she had known. I stubbornly hoarded the caretaker role and lost considerable rest because of it. First of all, the agent booked us in an emergency seat on the plane to accommodate Tom's height. The flight attendant was clearly aware of Tom's inability to function in an emergency but

allowed us to remain in the seat, watching us carefully throughout the flight; consequently, I spent time anxious and realized that my anxiety would permeate the trip. But I did not have the wherewithal to change our course, to talk to the flight attendant or contact the cruise line to make special arrangements. Tom and I would take our much anticipated trip, our last trip, as a normal middle-aged couple as best we could. And I would find ways to accommodate.

We began the cruise in Vancouver, British Columbia and arrived just before the launch, frantically negotiating late flight connections, luggage, and taxis. But, once on the ship, order soon ensued. Cruising practices are organized, even ritualistic. The cruise world, despite its claims of relaxation and freedom, is built on very clear timelines. Our room was an inside stateroom – another regret, once I realized how beautiful the scenery was throughout the trip. But the fear of Tom on a verandah would have cost me anything I gained from the beauty of the view. So, we spent all of our time on deck together, wrapping ourselves in plaid ship blankets, walking up and down the decks, first one then another. The promenade was our base and the early days offered us a constant view of mountains and water. Eagles, at first a novelty, called out by the first spotter each morning, became commonplace. Whales were different. Late afternoons were whale watching time. We would go to the crow's nest, which doubled as a piano bar, and watch intently to tunes sung ala Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. After an hour or so, Tom had to move again, and we would return to the promenade and walk. As long as we were alone and watching the open spaces, the trip was restful, much like our drives to the country. We would

carry our cameras everywhere. I shot the mountains, the shoreline, Tom shot the sky. Once we both caught the image of a whale far in front of us, both of us aiming at different images.

The evenings were harder. There were regular cocktail gatherings that we attended once. We sat with a mother and her daughter who spent most of the hour trying to flirt with Tom. They were friendly and warm and generous people but he clung to me like a child, unable to engage with them at all. I could never coax any words of explanation from him but he always was afraid of attention that demanded a response, demanded him to react specifically to another person. After that, we avoided those gatherings, limiting our formal cruise experiences to dinner. We had booked second seating, 8:30, because, as our travel agent explained, it would be a quieter, adult crowd. We had a lovely table by a window and were seated with another couple we had never met. In our normal life, the couple would have been ideal. He was a physics professor at the University of California, San Diego; she was an opera singer and a professor as well. They were officially with a group of music educators who were gathered on the ship. The couple chose to eat separately and drew us as their tablemates. Once again, in seven days of travel, I said nothing of Tom's illness. Sometimes he could speak to them. He talked of his last book. He had a set speech that came easily to him. A vivid memory, those words became a litany of his success. He repeated that litany several times over the course of the week. Our companions were polite. By the end it was clear they knew something was wrong, but we never spoke of it. I would see them on the ship during the day, in

the lunch lines, on deck. We spoke cordially but saved our substantial talking for evenings, storing up material for conversation. The excursion days were easiest. Our tablemates were hardy, adventurous types who fished and bicycled, rafted on the rivers, climbed the rugged mountains we viewed from the ship. Nervous about Tom's ability to stay focused, I opted for passive tours so we never went on the same excursions. These outings were always enjoyable so we could happily share our separate whale and bear sightings, exchange artisan shopping stories. By the third glass of wine each evening, I stopped worrying about whether they knew anything or not, whether I needed to protect Tom from the reality of his disease. Our dinner would end when Tom stood up. Sometimes it was late, after dessert and an extra drink. Sometimes it was midmeal. He would simply stand as if he needed to be somewhere else right away. We would return to the deck, absorbing the late sunlight. Tom would aim his camera toward the sea until finally darkness and exhaustion let us bring the night to a close.

As I think back on the cruise I realize that it was the only way for us to go to Alaska in our circumstances and also the worst possible option. The forum is so public that it is impossible to hide and simultaneously benefit from the experience. Excursions were usually pleasant because we were focused so much on observation and were usually alone or in very small groups. In Ketchikan we took a cab to the city dump and spent an hour watching a mother bear and her cubs raid the garbage. In Sitka we toured on a nature boat, garnering up-close and personal views of whales, bears, and a raft of more than fifty otters frolicking in a cove. During our stop at



Juneau, we even took a ride in a biplane that seated only three of us besides the pilot. Tom and I were joined by a retired elementary school teacher from Seattle. A miniscule woman, she tucked herself into the back of the plane. Tom unafraid of this journey grabbed the front seat by the pilot. Again, I felt guilty. The pilot should know, I thought. But Tom was amazingly coherent in this context. There was nothing to do but watch out the front of the plane and he was openly eager to take off. Deathly afraid of heights, I hid in the middle of the plane, blending my own fear with my anxieties about Tom. But within minutes, my fear subsided and I was overtaken by the beauty of the glaciers below. Inspired by Tom who kept his camera to the glass for the entire hour's journey (except when I was helping him change the film), I too shot picture after picture, returning with some of the best photographs I have ever taken, somehow depicting the energy we absorbed from that ride. Even dinner that night was more exuberant than usual, my self-consciousness over-ridden by the grandness of the experience.

The other most successful times were often the most public, when people were crowded on deck to observe some natural phenomenon. No one cared about anyone else. Nature outshone us all, dominated our focus. We spent one day at Glacier Bay National Park. A park ranger gave a speech just before we arrived in the park (Arriving meant cruising the bay within the park confines.). As with most of the trip, I divided my time between paying attention to the event and checking to see if Tom was paying attention, not unlike the habit of parents with small children. At one point Tom stood up and took a picture of the park ranger, which I thought was a good

sign. After the talk, which was broadcast through the public address system, the entire shipful of passengers gathered on one side of the ship in a scene reminiscent of a New Yorker cartoon. I imagined the crew locked in rooms on the other side of the ship to keep us from capsizing. The ranger had told us how to look for puffins, more eagles, otters that might be on ice floes. But mostly he told us to watch the tidewater glaciers as they “calved,” sending giant chunks of ice into the water. He made it clear that we couldn’t count on seeing these 200 foot sheets of ice, ice that had adhered to the mass for thousands of years, crash into the water. But we needed to watch, to listen for the foreboding rumble and see. This event would be the one we would all remember from coming to Alaska. “Hold your cameras ready,” he said. At first I looked for puffins but even my zoom rendered only tiny dots of color on the far ice. No otters in sight. We wandered until we found a space at the rail, a space where I could stand just in front of Tom and we could both aim our cameras at the ice, hoping that the one piece of the giant expanse before us would be the one to break free and dazzle. We waited a long time. The ship moved around the bay in a predatory crawl, first to one side, then the other. Tom wanted to move. It was hard for him to stay still. Other people flitted from spot to spot, jockeying for position. As always, I second-guessed our stance, fretted that we wouldn’t see, that maybe we should move. Finally there was a noise, a deep resonant rumble that gave no indication of its origin. We all pulled up our cameras. Tom held his close to his eyes, pivoting around the bay trying to find the movement. Then directly in front of us, the noise became evident. No image at first, just sound and then a burst of white steam at the top of the

glacier, and in slow motion, a thousand years of ice collapsed into the bay. We clicked a dozen pictures in the time it took to complete its descent. The first collapse seemed to create a reaction, four, five, six more calves crashed into the water, some smaller and quicker, others tall and slow. By noon the boat had turned and was leaving the bay. Some of the passengers had tired of the sight, making their way to the long lunch lines, grabbing free drinks as they waited. Tom and I made our way gradually to the very back of the boat. I had stopped taking pictures, content to watch, to reflect on the history of these massive forms. But Tom continued to hold up his camera, often taking pictures of the solid masses that remained. Occasionally we would see some movement in the faraway ice; the sound was muted by distance.

We returned from Alaska through Vancouver, attempting to spend a few days there, taking in the city. But the process of normal travel overwhelmed Tom and we took an early flight back to Kansas City. We returned home, travel-weary and accosted by the normal excessive heat of Kansas in July. The next day I took over fifty rolls of film to be developed. It took the one-hour photo people a little longer than usual to process our order. By the time I got the photographs, Tom had little memory of which ones were his and which ones were mine, but was excited about them all. He spent the next few weeks going through each of the packets over and over. He showed everyone who visited. We framed some of the calving glaciers, a few shots from the plane. By September he had stopped talking about the trip and the box of photos was relegated to the closet. He continued to take a few pictures each day, all of the sky from our front yard. As the weather turned cold, he began to stay

inside. Occasionally as he paced around the house, he would pick up the photo of the falling glacier and show me as if I had never seen it before.

## Moment

Life happens to you  
accidentally  
when you can't remember  
what you were supposed to be  
doing. Standing at the kitchen  
counter, holding a knife.  
Were there carrots to cut?  
Did I polish the blade?  
Was I threatening  
myself? Someone else?  
It's hard to tell. The lines  
form so thin, almost  
transparent, between knowing  
and not, between peace  
and anger. I stand  
straddling safety, hours  
undeciphered and bland,  
a knife between my fingers  
pointing down.

## Poetry Lesson

Reading a poem should be  
like stroking a cat, strong, firm,  
but not controlling. The hand  
should feel the fur first, then the firm  
flesh and bones underneath. The cat  
should bend, sway, move,  
to the petting, then purr.  
Purr, the deep metric motor  
of sense and soul.  
The cat should give.

I have a cat  
of fur and bones and purr.  
A Himalayan,  
part Persian, part Siamese.  
The fluff and flow  
of language draw me in  
but it is the strength  
of Siamese muscle  
and brain that holds me,  
seduces me to pet,  
and give back.

## Consequences

My fifteen-year-old cat has developed three bumps under her skin, two around her shoulder and one on her lower back. I say she has developed them because I don't remember them being there before. One, the first I noticed, seems slightly larger this week, but I'm not certain. It might simply seem bigger in comparison with bump number two. I check often. I have become slightly obsessed (a term much like a little bit pregnant) with these bumps. Two are soft, slightly squishy; one is harder, near the spine. I worry about them, fear they are signs of the end. She is, after all, fifteen. I have not yet taken her to the vet. If it is the end, I don't want to know. I also don't want to subject her to unnecessary intrusions on her reclusive life. She likes me. She likes her two or three favorite sleeping spots – not much else. She is gentle, shy, and has a squealing purr that makes many of my bad days infinitely more pleasant. I pet her regularly to feel her soft fur, to hear her squeal. Now when I pet her, I feel the bumps. I get depressed, anxious. Tomorrow I will call the vet. I said that yesterday. And the day before. Maybe the bumps will go away, just bites from an excessively long flea season. A bruise or two or three from our young cat's playful attacks. I keep hoping.

I have called the vet before about ailing pets. Too often the pets have died. I have called the doctor too, after hoping too long that a loved one's malady would go away. Often it didn't. I had to face some dire diagnosis. I'm not good at it. I spent two years watching a man I loved become ill before I acknowledged it as something

worth checking. I wrote it off: He is depressed I would say. Overworked. Nervous. It took a doctor to say he is ill. Once the diagnosis was final, etched in the stony air of the clinic, I couldn't pretend anymore. I had to re-see everything. He was a different person. The only plans we could make, because the disease had no cure, were daily plans on a path to death. Or so it seemed.

After the clarity of knowing though, I developed an almost hyper-awareness of the present, and vaguely, anxiously imagined the next if or when of illness. I examined the future's every possibility, the disease's every permutation. I learned. I translated all the pretense of early denial into the understanding of reality. I read books, engaged in discussions on the internet, and, more than anything, paid attention to his every word, his every action. In some ways I was making up for the earlier denial, guilt translated to zealously. In other ways I had entered a space I could not leave, the space I avoided before, somehow knowing that once I knew something was wrong, I had to live in its presence, its consequences all the time.

His illness lasted a year and a half more, progressing steadily until he died. During that time I always had to face the day at hand and the fear of losing my ability to cope, a fear that didn't diminish until it was over. Some days I escaped physically. But the anxiety and sense of responsibility just traveled with me. Denial was no longer feasible.

As I look at my cat's signs of illness, I live in that in-between space of denial and awareness. I can't claim the bliss of ignorance or the agony of knowledge. This ambivalence seems a common state for me. I remember being in trouble as a child, or



knowing I would be. My habit of reacting alternated between a brash demand for quick punishment – I would announce my sins and suggest ruthless, cruel consequences – and postponement. I would walk home oh-so slowly, sit on the back porch, playing with the dog I seldom played with. Those were the times I knew my mother would really be disappointed in me. Our relationship would be somehow altered. The air in the house would change, fill up with tension or hopelessness. Once I confessed, she would just shrug, toss a plate on the table for dinner. There were no hugs or forgiveness. I had done wrong.

I live in denial because that experience, not any particular incident, specifically, is the most real kind of experience to me. I am painfully aware of consequences. “Why me?” becomes “Why not me?” in the realm of punishment. I expect bad news. My cat’s bumps, I am certain, will be life-threatening. I am working my sadness and fear into acceptance. Temporary denial allows me time. If perchance the bumps are trivial, I have readied myself for the next dire event. It’s not that I’m really pessimistic. It’s just that I don’t expect reprieves, and rewards, and special favors. But sometimes the consequences I expect are just too much to bear at that moment. I want a little longer to ponder the comfort I have taken for granted before I face the inevitable.

## Islands

I spent the first forty-five years of my life in the shade. I didn't think sun was bad for me. I just avoided it most of the time. The direct heat was uncomfortable. I spent occasional days at the local lake but usually curled up in the glider on the screened porch of our friend's cabin. I'm not a swimmer, so swimming in the lake always frightened me. If I couldn't see my legs through the muddy water, I was anxious. I didn't like the mud oozing through my toes. The swimming I did – the swimming lessons I took, which didn't take, so to speak – were at a pool in my dad's office building. The Adams Building, part of a Phillips Petroleum Company complex in Bartlesville, was fully equipped with an Olympic-sized pool, a bowling alley, and several eating areas. The pool was indoors, fully shaded. While the space got pretty chilly, I was able to avoid the sun. I spent a lot of time there for a non-swimmer. I liked to dive, once I got the hang of it. My first day on the high board, the instructor marched our class over to the board and made us climb the ladder, walk penguin-style to the edge of the board, and jump. I got to the end and froze. He yelled. Hours passed, so it seemed. Unable to jump, I finally turned around, walked back on the shaky board and forced my way down the ladder through the other swimmers, irritating and endangering everyone. It would have been much easier to jump. I figured that out after a while and ultimately jumped, then dived for several more years – in the shade. My only outdoor swimming happened a few times a year at the city pool, officially called Sanipool, touting its effective chlorine sanitation system.

Ironically, it was probably the dirtiest city pool I have ever encountered. I would go with friends or more often with my brother's girlfriend who liked to lie in the sun. One afternoon when I was there with her, I got a blistering sunburn that sent me back inside for a long time. Bad sunburns happened again a few other times – once visiting my cousins in Neodesha, Kansas, where going to the pool was literally the only thing people could do summer afternoons. (I actually moved there and figured out I could find the shade working in the concession stand.). And a few times on visits to California, where the sun was far more inviting than it was in Oklahoma or Kansas. It deceived me into another bad sunburn and ruined my fascination and near conversion as a sunbaby.

I have always spent time outdoors, hiking in the mountains, walking through trails or on neighborhood sidewalks. But shade was always plentiful if I wanted to find it and I usually did. So, when I met David Brown, who is now my husband, I had to make some compromises if we were going to make a go of it. He craves the sun, preferring heat, the high 90's if he has anything to say about it, to the cool crisp temperatures that energize me. And he loves islands, particularly Caribbean Islands, beaches that come up against intense blue sea. He loves to lie on those island beaches, reading mysteries hour after hour, sipping rum punch or Red Stripe Beer. He can do that for days, lie around and relax. He also loves floating on catamarans and snorkeling. Once, after his first wife died, he even went to sailing school in Tortola, spending his days fighting with a small Cat and his evenings drinking the soreness away. The idea of sailing school makes me anxious even to think about. He

has been to dozens of islands, preferring one for its beaches, another for its ambience. I had never even considered going to the Caribbean when I met him. It was not on my very long list of dream destinations. But I changed.

Our courtship was an unusual one. We met after our spouses had died. We knew of each other but had never met. We had mutual friends and met through one of them on a bad day for both of us. I had spent the afternoon crying. Nearly a year after my husband had died of Pick's disease, a form of dementia that had lasted two and a half years, I felt lonely, deeply lonely, as if I lacked any possibility of intimacy in my life. I spent my days talking to people – colleagues, students, at that time, parents. Those conversations felt shallow in the most literal way, as if the words came from the top of my throat, the outer layers of my emotions, the surface of my brain. Nothing about my life seemed real or meaningful, even though I was doing work that I loved. I was just in a bad spot. David had just broken up with someone. She had, as he told our mutual friend, Carolyn, put him off women. Deeply in love with his wife, Liane, who died of colon cancer, a woman who fought for causes and against cancer with equal intensity, he was also deeply lonely and overwhelmed by the care of their two adopted children. On this particular Friday, Carolyn called me as I arrived home and talked me into going to a “pub night” put on by the law school. A friend of hers, a law professor, was playing guitar for the gig – what I have learned is an annual tradition. I thought she was going alone. When she picked me up, she told me that David would be going too, but, that he didn't know I was going either. She was worried, since he was “off women.” Her worry was well-founded. When he

arrived at the car and saw me, it was clear that he wasn't happy. Before he could turn to leave – it seemed a distinct possibility – I informed him, “It's okay. Tonight, I'm not a woman.” He got in and we went to dinner. Things stayed tense for another hour or so, through the first bottle of wine and some tempura appetizers. By dinner, we were talking. I was asking questions, a particular talent I have, and he was telling me his life story. By the time we headed to the main event, he was fondling my knee and intimacy was not a problem any more for either of us. After a call to his babysitter, he ended up at my house and I drove him home the next morning.

We spent many hours on the phone over the next two weeks, went on a date that was more frightening than comfortable, and then finally went to a dance, another annual event that was a benefit for the Douglas County AIDS Project. This dance became one of my favorite events of the year, a venue where gay and straight couples could comfortably love each other, dance wildly or tenderly in an aura of acceptance. Kelly Hunt, a local singer who has achieved some national fame, always played and gave the event a special energy. I've thought of making a documentary, called “Slow Dance at the DCAP Ball,” imagining a camera on my shoulder rotating around the room, capturing people as they hold onto their partners, and sway gently to Kelly's tunes. That ambience helped us to relax. We had the opportunity to dance – I hadn't danced in years, at least on a dance floor, but David reminded me it was a “dance” not a “sit “ – and talk and start to get to know each other. By the end of the evening, it was clear we would see each other again, but he insisted that he wouldn't introduce me to his children for a few months, to see how things went. Well, two days of phone

conversation later, he invited me to his house to watch a basketball game, an evening made complete by a six and an eight year old, who greeted me at the door.

Needless to say, the next few months were complicated by the children. We made a point of finding date nights, but, in reality, we were pursuing a courtship of four, not two people – four people, three cats, and a dog, that is. We took a weekend jaunt to San Francisco, met up with Liane's nephew (not completely comfortable for me) and walked the city. It was fun but still early enough in our relationship that it seemed more getaway than get-acquainted. We went on a summer vacation together, with the kids. We even tried camping, not the best way to relax together. I think it's a given that two people cannot put up a tent without having an argument. The children alternated between pouting and screaming. I knew David less at the end of that week than at the beginning as we protected ourselves individually from the chaos of the family vacation. It became clear that we needed to go somewhere together, without the children. David's choice, of course, was the Caribbean. He began to research options. He had been to lots of islands with Liane. They also went on an annual cruise with Liane's mom, stopping regularly at three or four different islands. He wanted to find someplace new for us to explore. He found the Turks and Caicos, a group of islands in the British West Indies, just southeast of the Bahamas. I had never heard of them – probably not much of a claim – but neither had he. So we found a week in early September – the height of hurricane season, so relatively cheap – and made our reservations for a small pink hotel in Providenciales and islands became a regular part of my life.

## Providenciales

We left for Provo – that’s what the locals call it – on a Sunday. We flew through Miami Airport, an experience in itself. Turquoise and orange neon set the tone in the cafes and waiting rooms. We had a slight delay. The plane, at the time, the only flight going to these islands from the U.S., left in the late afternoon and was full. It was the end of summer. As I looked around the plane I saw dozens of mothers and children, loaded with shopping bags. We sat next to one of the mothers. She was Canadian. In fact, everyone else on the plane was Canadian. Provo is filled with ex-pat Canadians who long for the sun, husbands who want to start all over in paradise. These men were usually businessmen, who had worked for big companies, subject to bosses and rules, and saw Provo as fertile ground for making more money than they could make in Toronto or Ottawa. The women and children on the plane had gone home for summer vacation, had bought new fashionable school clothes and supplies to take back for the beginning of term, which started the following week. New Colonials who enjoyed the status they could maintain on the island by bringing the accoutrements of their old world back every year. Our seatmate had lived in Provo for about seven years. Yes, she missed home, she missed the conveniences, the crisp fall afternoons, not the snow, not the pace. She had moved to Provo because her husband had a yen. The children had been small. They could adapt. Provo had “private” schools, filled with other Canadian children. When they got to Provo, it was undeveloped. Things were changing, she warned us. “It’s not the quiet little

island it used to be. Americans are moving in.” No longer a part of the controlling force on the island, she feared losing the status they moved there to attain. We came to understand her concern during our week on the island as we watched developers from Florida and Texas sizing up plots of land as they sipped rum and tequila. She told us of local eateries, places where Canadians gathered on Wednesday night for tacos, on Fridays for beer. We would have fun she assured us, but get with the locals, she told us – the Canadian locals, we assumed.

When we arrived at the airport I encountered what I know now to be the cliché of all Caribbean airports, the steel drum, island music that starts as the plane sets down on the tiny tarmac, that greets you as you walk down the stairs 1950’s style, into the balmy air. The ambience is effective. All of my anxieties about the islands, about sitting still for a week, about being alone with David, didn’t melt exactly, but they subsided as we walked into the very small flat airport. Customs was pro forma. There was a long separate line of Canadians. They filled the airport with hustle and chatter. As Americans, we were in and out in minutes, our luggage arriving on a cart. We grabbed a cab and headed off through the island. After a few minutes on asphalt roads, we meandered onto narrow, gravel curves. On either side were one and two room shanties, painted in optimistic corals and blues. Island children – not Canadians – were playing in the roads, impervious to the taxi riding through their makeshift playground. Occasionally the driver would honk, not to warn them, but to say hello. He would wave and call out a name. After about fifteen minutes, we arrived at a nondescript pink stucco building that professed to be our



hotel, Le Deck, known according to the guide books as a scuba divers dream. We were not scuba divers, but the small size and promise of intimacy and friendliness had drawn us. All the atmosphere was saved for the ocean view, a view made all the more brilliant by the contrast to the front. That small pink hotel that welcomed us to Provo is now pressed between two giant American resorts that were in planning when we were there. Reservations available only by phone, they still draw divers avoiding all-inclusive exclusivity. In fact, during that week, most of the twenty or so rooms were filled with developers and scuba divers, the two groups that knew of the island and would, in their own ways, put it more firmly on the tourist map.

The manager was a Swiss man name Jan. He welcomed us warmly, asked about our lives in a friendly but nonintrusive way. Our room was on the second floor, decorated in what I now know to be basic island décor – white tile and wicker, bedspread and pillows of tropical print. We put away our luggage and hit the bar, tired from the journey. Jan was sitting at the end, messing with receipts. The bartender was another Canadian, still constructing his plan for living on the island. The bar, attached to the dining room, was outdoors, facing the ocean, hardly a building at all – just a roof and beams covering the necessary furniture. The sound of waves made me both anxious and excited. It was evening, the sun barely gone. Lanterns lit the tables and bar. Palm trees, sheltering the buildings, reflected in the pool beside us. It felt more like a movie set than reality. I still feel that way about palm trees. I grew up with a row of elm trees just outside my bedroom window. I sat in the tiny alcove, claiming breeze and shade from the rustling leaves. These trees

provided neither. Purely atmospheric. Still the setting was beautiful and teased me into the fantasy.

After a couple of drinks – David opted for his usual Scotch, while I played into island cliché and order frilly umbrella affairs with names I can no longer remember. We decided to eat in the adjoining dining room. The menu professed to be French, but was dominated by varying preparations of conch – conch fritters, conch and mango salad, conch etouffee. By the end of the week I was back to vodka and shrimp, realizing that I wasn't really in a movie and that conch didn't change much no matter what the preparation. The evening melted away and I felt excited about this new environment, however odd and unfamiliar it seemed.

We spent the next couple of days lying in the sun. We each brought with us a stack of books, mine more pretentious than David's. I teach English. I'm skeptical of escapist fiction. I realized very quickly that there is a reason they call it "summer reading." By the second day, I had turned down my hyperactive brain and settled into Oceanside laziness and had confiscated a few of David's mysteries. The routine was simple. Apply suntan lotion, read an hour or so, spend some time in the ocean, get a cocktail, repeat. I was tired enough to relax most of the time. For evenings we hired a cab to take us to a restaurant. We had a regular date with the taxi driver who had brought us from the airport. He would pick us up at 7 and take us to our restaurant de jour. The first couple of nights we went to restaurants we had read about in the guidebooks. They were fine but we were merely tourists ordering food. I was getting bored with the tourist pace, no matter how relaxing it was. By Wednesday, we

needed to do something besides lie on the beach. We had read about a conch farm – I had eaten my fill of conch. I figured I needed to see where they raised them. Dave, our regular taxi driver, was busy during the days. He recommended Gloria, who became our guide and historian for the rest of the week. At first we didn't talk much. We asked her about how she started driving a cab, how long she had driven, general chitchat. She dropped us at the conch farm and told us we wouldn't need to be there long. She was right. We walked around pools, observing conch at every stage of their existence, finishing at a pile of empty shells they offered for sale. We bought two. We then asked Gloria to take us around the island. She hesitated but first took us to the industrial section, up through the hills filled with new resort construction. Then we asked her more about the island, about where she lived. It took a while, but she finally warmed up and believed that we wanted a real tour. She took us to the Blue Hills area, the one section owned by islanders, an area that she insisted they would never sell to Canadians or Americans. It was their history, their future, their guarantee. The Canadians had accepted that fact, she said, choosing to work together on the island. She was not so sure about the recent American interest. We didn't offer her any reassurance. We drove through neighborhoods of small but tidy houses. Children were playing in yards, adults were gardening, painting, generally working on their property. We stopped at a food stand owned by her friend. We sat on benches; the hill overlooked a small bay. She told us about her family, her daughter who wanted to be a nurse. We told her about our kids too. On our way back to the hotel, we saw a new subdivision of island houses, the kind that show up on brochures

for sweepstakes prizes. We decided to stop, to go through the model homes. A woman from Atlanta, who was really just visiting the island, she insisted, offered us the tour, took our names and information. We pretended that we were moving to Provo, would most certainly be buying a house. She gave us forms and fliers informing us of bank policies and loan possibilities. When we started on the tour, she told Gloria she could wait in the small A-frame office. We told her Gloria was coming with us, which surprised this alien salesperson. We had discussed the development in the van with Gloria. She had told us about the houses that had been there before these. She was as curious as we were. So David and Gloria and I spent the next hour or so critiquing the houses, fascinated by the pools built into the living rooms and the waterfall bathrooms. By the end of our tour, the realtor knew we were just passing the time and left us to ourselves. Gloria dropped us at the hotel with another list of restaurants and plans for tomorrow's tour.

That night we hit the Tiki Hut, a hangout recommended by both our Canadian seatmate and Gloria. Wednesday was taco night and much of Provo seemed to be there. In this casual bar and grill on the docks, people were at ease, not in the vacationing sort of way, but relaxing at the end of a day of work. People were standing, talking, working the room, if you can call it that. The "hut" was made up of several roof and beam structures, one covering a large horseshoe bar, the others covering tables. There were even tables outside the structure, balanced on wooden walkways. We found two spots at the bar and joined the camaraderie. We drank too much and talked to people I hardly remember, but I do recall talking for hours to men

and women who had lived in Provo all their lives, to the Canadians who were seeking their fortunes and fantasies, even to the woman who had sat with us on the plane. On Wednesday I had learned something new about the island. People lived there, were invested in the life of the town, and I realized that I travel best when I pierce the surface of the places I visit. I was still a tourist, quick to purchase the Tiki Hut t-shirt they advertised at the cash register. But I knew something about the island at the end of that day and it helped me to feel at home there, a much more comfortable feeling than being on a movie set.

We relaxed into the rest of the week, touring with Gloria, trying more restaurants, and even spending a day on a catamaran, a real highlight. The ocean that day was quiet and calm. The only other people on the boat were the “captain” and a French couple. As we sailed out into the sea, I felt a longing for the island, the solidity of someplace that had seemed imaginary only a few days before. The captain would stop occasionally to let us get in the water. I wore my life vest and held tight to the ladder. Sometimes, with David’s encouragement, I floated off buoyed his arm or shoulders. He thrived in the water and I had to learn to trust him to help me keep afloat. The highlight of that day was Little Iguana Cay, a small iguana reserve protected by the Turks and Caicos government. As we walked onto the island – the boat could not go to shore – we were greeted by dozens of eager iguanas who surrounded us and sniffed our toes, joined us as we walked their island, an island completely in service to their survival. The whole island seemed iguana-sized, iguana-brown, formed by tiny hills and crevices, covered with brush and rock.

Nothing on the island was as tall as I was. I felt like Alice after taking the wrong pill, less tourist than alien. The island put all my travel in perspective. Shunning the tourist identity, I realized that meaningful travel demands an acknowledgement of alienation and difference, whether I visited new people on an island that seemed like a movie set or a tiny village of wildlife. Just after sunset, the catamaran touched shore at Provo and I felt at home as we walked back along the beach to our hotel.

The rest of the week, we returned to our favorite places, found out more about both Dave and Gloria and their families as they drove us around the island – Dave wanted to play music in the U.S. and Gloria wanted to travel. We talked to bartenders and bar owners, shopkeepers and sailors. At the end of these days, David and I would talk about our memories of the events, how the people, the places, the iguanas even , affected us. We shared something new to us both and negotiated the new experiences together. The pretend world of beachcombing is a great thing to talk about. As a couple we still long for a week together where work cannot find us, where children cannot interrupt our conversations, where we can stop for a little while to look at each other and remember what connected us. Getting to know the island, knowing that the island was a residence that existed before and outside of the tourist industry made me less skeptical of David, who wanted to be there. His hunger for the island was less a desire for some artificial paradise, my pre-ordained view of island life, than a desire for slower conversation and the luxury of time. Without time it is difficult to know someone. And the week in Provo allowed us time enough to face the chaos of our merging family that was about to begin.

## Martinique

### Learning the Islands

It was three years after Provo before we spent extended time again in the Caribbean. We had traveled to France and England, the latter attached to a regular study abroad program I lead in London, and we had gone on three January cruises with relatives, making superficial stops on a number of islands. But David was in need of beach time and blue water to replenish his tired soul. He found a “deal” that split a week between Barbados and Martinique, a British and a French island respectively. I liked the symmetry of matching Caribbean islands with our European travels. He liked the idea of beaches. I was eager to go to Barbados, interested in the colonial aspects, ready to put my academic gears into override while David read mysteries and relaxed. Unfortunately the colonial atmosphere that had intrigued me in theory strangled us both leaving neither of us comfortable with the mixture that Barbados provided. The friendliness we had encountered in Provo from taxi drivers and bartenders chilled in Barbados into formal expertise. Our hotel was a “plantation-style” structure on a beautiful beach, but the plantation social system still seemed in place as well, with clientele, both American and British, demanding servitude from the hotel employees. The “tour director” advised us of all the safe places to go, which translated to tourist attractions. When we asked her where we could pick up the local bus to go to Bridgetown, she simply ignored our question. We took the local bus anyway and were the only nonresidents on the very crowded bus,

clearly breaching the normal protocol of the island. Even the taxi driver we hired for regular trips around the island, ironically named Amigo, never chatted with us. He was polite, efficient, and punctual. He drove where we asked him to drive. When we asked him about good places to eat or view the landscape, he always said he would take us wherever we wanted to go. We ate lovely dinners at cliff side restaurants decorated with wicker chairs and torch lamps but we never relaxed, even on the beaches. The week was unusually cool for the southern Caribbean and the chill air simply corresponded with our other encounters.

After three days, we left for Martinique, via St. Lucia on a tiny island hopper. We were to pick up a second plane at the St. Lucia airport and arrive in Martinique in the early evening. When we landed at the airport, which had only three or four counters inside, we realized that the airline we were supposed to take wasn't listed on any of the departure boards. We asked around and the employees, from ticket agents to custodians, were pretty certain that the airline we were asking about didn't come through St. Lucia. Three days in a colonial icebox hadn't mellowed our nerves. I was angry. David was determined to get somewhere to relax, so we spent the next hour on the two public phones in the airport talking to our travel agent, ranting at an American Airlines representative, and screaming at each other. David even asked about renting a boat. We were trapped on an island we knew nothing about. After about an hour several things became clear. Air Martinique didn't go through St. Lucia but our tickets were valid for an airline that did. That was the good news. The bad news was that there was no plane that evening. We could fly out at nine the next



morning. Resigned to the solution, we found a taxi driver to take us somewhere to spend the night. The unexpected bonus was that St. Lucia was friendly. Our first taxi driver laughed at our predicament, told us we would be very happy on her island and offered to take us to a hotel that would keep us out of those “boring all-inclusive places most Americans liked.” We liked her style.

We arrived at a small hotel called the Bay Gardens. Except for the total wicker décor, it looked more like an American roadside motel than a tropical resort. It was clean and crisp, and, most importantly, friendly. We got our room and went straight to the bar to calm our nerves. The experience was antithetical to Barbados. The bartender teased the other couple sitting at the bar, waitresses chatted back and forth with each other as they crossed the room. By the time we sat down with our bottle of champagne, we knew all about our waitress and her family. The owner, an Irishman who had married a native islander, joined us for dessert. We told each other our histories, he explained his love of St. Lucia and we vowed to return for more than one night. By the time our dessert was finished, the evening was over and our short stay in St. Lucia had refreshed us for the final leg of the journey.

We had only a short wait at the airport for the tiny needle-nosed plane that took us to Martinique. The other passengers were business people carrying briefcases, incongruous with our shorts and sandals. We were booked in a resort on the bay across from Fort de France. It was quite beautiful but proved to be much more exotic and glamorous than we had in mind. The staff was professional. The restaurant was formal. The beach was wide and bordered a cove of rich blue

Caribbean water, calm, when it wasn't filled with cruise passengers. The hotel was in cahoots with a daily ocean liner. Each morning the cruise passengers on excursion would arrive at 10 and stay until 4. Our room was right next to the beach, opening out directly onto white sand and palm trees. Chairs and chaise lounges spotted the entire area by the hotel. Further on was open beach, empty only early mornings and occasional evenings. Our room was more cabin than hotel room, with wooden beams and mosquito netting, but the bathroom was filled with sumptuous toiletries and golden lighting. Away from the main public rooms, the hotel provided an incongruous experience of luxury and rustica, the rustic giving way at the minibar and room service menu, in French, of course.

We spent the first day relaxing on the beach, soaking up the sun and ignoring the crowds. It proved pretty easy. Vendors walked among us selling batik saris and straw hats. Music played on the small island bar built in the cove. We were content simply to stay put. The second day we took the ferry to Fort de France, a stark contrast to our fantasy resort and, consequently, comfortable. We spent some time walking through Franz Fanon park, the name alone providing contrast, enjoying the blend of urban noise and tropical flowers. Our favorite part of the day was our visit to the large tent market, filled with bins of spices, rice, beans, and fruits and vegetables of all sorts. The aromas blended and wafted a full block away. Fruits were double-size, avocados the size of footballs, mangos equally large. Women chatted with each other as they peeled and washed and arranged their produce. When we returned to the hotel we stopped at the pool bar and watched the sun set on the

rimless pool, built to optically merge into the ocean, at the far end. The image was mesmerizing but seemed shallow and cold compared to the vibrant energy of the market earlier in the day.

Our final day we were to go to the mountains on a tour we arranged through the concierge. The tour began in the morning and left from our hotel. Susie, a native of Martinique, who spoke *some* English, picked us up in her jeep. A French couple joined us for the tour. As we drove to meet the other jeep that would join our tour, Susie explained everything in two tongues, first long and elaborate in French, then simply in English. She told us about banana plants and coffee beans and butterflies and we watched out the window as we headed toward the north end of the islands, toward the mountains and volcano that give Martinique its beauty. We met the other van, all English-speaking and young, teenagers practically, and stopped off and on at various forest walkways. They weren't rain forests exactly, but walkways bordered by giant leafy plants. The floor was moist and aromatic, dirt and foliage melding into one scent. I felt relaxed. After a few stops, we continued driving up curvy, unpaved roads. Susie seemed calm at the wheel. The other driver drove faster but she seemed indifferent to catching him. Our main event on this excursion was to climb the waterfall at Gorge de la Falaise. After a stop for cups of mango juice at a roadside stand, we headed to the Gorge. This, our hotel tour director told us, was the most beautiful experience on the island. I had gone to some waterfalls on cruises. We climbed wet rocks behind the cascading waters, walked paths across from waterfalls

that appeared out of nowhere, but never exerted ourselves terribly on these walks. They were relaxing strolls into the landscape. The water always felt rejuvenating, taking the humid air to its appropriate density. Susie dropped us off at a small hut operated by two young island men. They spoke no English. One of them, a young man in his early twenties, barefoot and wearing torn jean shorts and no shirt, joined our group and calmly instructed us in Creole and make-shift sign language. He handed us climbing shoes, sort of like jellies with suction cups on the bottom. The American teenagers made jokes about being octopi, though they said octopuses, and we all changed shoes and dumped our outer wear at lockers behind their hut. Mateus (or that's what his name sounded like – I never saw it written but asked him several times to say it ) signaled for us to follow him into the jungle, for yes it seemed a jungle this time. The path was dark, spotted intermittently with bright piercing rays that offered no guidance. He waved his hand high so we could see. He was calm and jovial, smiled at us but didn't laugh. The path through the jungle was a downward spiral. Occasionally we would have a break in the trees, a bridge to cross. The walk took about half an hour. I felt confident. I could walk in jungles. I didn't mind the cool, dark air. Then we reached the gorge and the river, as it were, at this point about twelve feet across. The water was fast, not like a rapids in Colorado, but forceful. He motioned for us to step in. The water rushed over a floor of boulders, stones, pebbles. There was no smooth path to negotiate. As I stepped into the water, I panicked, afraid to go on, unable to go back. The first few yards were level, only the stones to impede the walk. I stepped awkwardly around the largest ones, the water rushing up

to my knees. The others in the group seemed at ease, even the man who seemed a dozen years my senior. David tried to hold on to me but it seemed far more embarrassing than romantic to receive his help. I tensed up more and more as we moved into the narrow passage and ascending riverbed. Water rushed faster and faster as the bed narrowed. Soon there was nothing but large rocks to walk on and after a few near misses I fell into the water, scraping my elbow as I tried to grab the boulder in my path. The group stopped as they heard the splash, my frustrated yelp. Mateus came from the front of the group to help me up. I was humiliated but I was also afraid, afraid I simply couldn't handle this hike, afraid to delay the rest of the group, afraid that I had bottled myself into this anxiety about adventure and would miss out on something beautiful. No one seemed angry or impatient. They encouraged me in English and French. Mateus held out his hand. I hesitantly took it and pulled myself up and sat on the boulder. I rinsed my elbow with the water that flowed around me. Again he held out his hand and spoke words I didn't understand, but I knew what he meant. He meant to lead me through this gorge. In that moment I felt first pathetic and then determined. I wanted to go to the waterfall. I wanted to be able to walk through the water as it gushed around my feet. I wanted to walk on the rocks, on slanted walls that formed the footpath. I couldn't do it without help. David was fine on his own but helping me would make it difficult for him. So I reached out and took Mateus's hand. He turned quickly, gesturing with his other hand toward his bare feet. He stepped on a rock. I followed, stepping on the same rock. He stepped in the open water. I followed exactly. Step after step after step, I held his hand and

walked where he walked. At first I didn't breathe. I saw nothing around me. I focused entirely on Mateus's feet. As we entered caves and tunnels, I stepped onto the walls, onto small footholds I couldn't even see. I just saw where he stepped and stepped there. After about half a mile, I began to relax. I began to trust his steps. I began to look around at the stone architecture of the gorge, at the green lacy foliage that embedded it. Our pace quickened and we led the group, Mateus gesturing to everyone, identifying the foliage in his own tongue, pointing to the spouts of water that came through the cracks in the tunnels. The route was unpredictable. Mateus would sometimes step deep into the water then move quickly up the sides of the banks and tunnels. At times we were almost horizontal with the water below us. I never second-guessed his choices but carefully anchored my foot where his foot had been. After a mile or so we came to a very small break in a wall of large boulders. He took my shoulders and gently pushed me through. The ground was flat, the pebbles small enough to walk across. As I entered what seemed to be a cave I saw the waterfall directly in front of me, fluorescent green, ebullient, splashing splendidly into a small pool. The cave was large enough for us all to stand around the walls and look at the water, explorers discovering their mythical youth. I watched with relief and satisfaction and Mateus moved through the group on the narrow walkway, took pictures of the frolicking couples as they leaped into the water. David and I stood watching for a while then Mateus came over nudged me to go into the chest-deep pool. David took my hand and we stepped into the pool, where I experienced the catharsis of surrender under the steady rush of the water.

We stayed in the pool for about half an hour, finally readying to make the return trek. I tensed up again wondering how I would go back, embarrassed to ask for more help but having no idea how to locate the footholds, the steady rocks that provided my path to the waterfall. While people gathered outside the entrance, Mateus came back to get me, took my hand. I couldn't refuse but felt awkward, helpless. As we began the walk he turned around, said some words that I could not understand and let go of my hand. He pointed to his feet and smiled. The return was mine to make with his guidance, stage two. Again, I was tentative to start, afraid I couldn't see or judge where he stepped. But each step seemed clear and precise. I began to anticipate the rocks he would use for support, the spaces in the water that were open and clear. We led the group from the outset. I thought we were going slowly, I concentrated so much on where I was walking. But soon I realized that we were fifty feet ahead of the rest. At times we had to wait. As we waited for the others to join us, I even felt impatient to continue, eager to resume the exhilaration of accomplishment. The last half mile, Mateus set me off on my own. David joined me and we walked sometimes faltering a little, but steady enough to enjoy the beauty of the gorge, to relax into the experience. My whole body felt energized by the surroundings, the smells, the exercise of learning..

We arrived back at the hut to find another group waiting for Mateus's guidance. He waved goodbye to us and quickly began to chat with and gesture to them, helping his partner hand out the requisite suction shoes. As I put on my shorts and regular shoes, I realized that I had learned from Mateus more than how to travel

the gorge, but how to teach traveling of any sort. He trusted himself and his own understanding enough to guide me and he trusted me to follow his guidance. In a couple of hours Mateus had led me to my own independence and given me lessons in how to lead others to that same freedom. David gave Mateus a nice tip, but that didn't seem enough or even relevant to what I felt. I quickly wrote a note in English and gave it to Mateus as he instructed his new students. He took the note and smiled. I don't know if he ever read it or could read it, but I feel sure he understood what it said. I watched as he walked with the new group down the path toward the gorge and hoped that they understood the value of his teaching.



## Golfe Dulce

I am on a ship floating along Golfo Dulce, the sweet gulf of Costa Rica, the land of my children. They come from a lush womb of green, endless, toppling green, leaf over leaf, branch over branch, an aromatic palpable green. The green is thick like breathing. It carries the breath of my children's life. Each morning they breathe in my face the lush green of this land. They come from this lush womb, it oozes their very being. My own womb feels dry, but for sex or pleasure, children dead or abandoned before floating to life. I float from my own mother's womb, lushness in a stark, dry body of bone and muscle, her own lush green saved for sex and child-bearing.

Can I know who they are, these children born of a fertile body, bearing their own fertile bodies, living outside themselves, their lushness open and full. My own lushness hidden inside.

Elia is the green, floral hills, home of birds and birds and birds and the water washing up to touch her shore. Anthony is the limbs from tree upon tree, climbing the hills, rooted in hot earth, carrying life underneath and into the branches.

I feel cold and northern here.

It is the recurring threat of children, the nightmare of parents, so common, so frequently uttered in fits of anger or pique, when a child faces unmanageable commands: “I’m just going to run away.” “Just wait, when I’m 18, I’m out of here.” And so the litany of unhappy adolescents fills houses and, after a time, parents even come to ignore the words, not at first when fear is fresh and real. But the threat has the power to create a response. “Don’t be ridiculous!” or “Calm down, this is not that big a deal,” or eventually, “Fine, leave. See how well you can take care of yourself.” In our case, the threats started in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Elia, 14, when her classmates were 12, Costa Rican, when her parents were white middle-class Americans, when the friends she could converse with lived in group homes or foster care, or were housed by aunts and uncles after gangs had threatened their childhood existence in far off cities. We countered with all the activities so prized by millennium parents: premiere soccer, band, drama, photography, tap dance. All of these diversions came and went not because Elia was bored but because she was overwhelmed. Despite annual trips to psychologists and learning specialists, we stumbled along, imagining that her good grades and constant praise for a good work ethic would keep her committed. We accepted the mood swings as ordinary adolescence. We were buoyed by our friends who exchanged their own emotional horror stories. Parenting adolescents was hard. We just needed to get through it. And so we went along expecting, praising, forbidding, as if our words would coax her along to successful adulthood.

Elia's first threat scared us. We even called the psychiatrist in the middle of the night. Elia sat on the porch, perched to leave. David said his piece and left her alone. "If you leave, I will call the police," he said. He is a lawyer and argues like a lawyer even at home. His certainty is not so firm as his words but she believed him and waited on the porch. Then he called the psychiatrist. Meanwhile, I went in and out of the house, monitoring her, cajoling her. She wanted to be left alone, then wanted to talk, back and forth for an hour. She had demands she wanted to negotiate. "I want a gun," she said. "I want birth control pills. I want to get a pedicure." All of these demands had the same urgency. She had the phone book searching for her demands. I said no to the gun. She didn't like it. She finally went back into her room. We talked more, her brother peeking in and out as we talked. He was afraid. He was calm, obedient. He knew the rules. Don't be bad at the same time as your sister. But it was more than that. He was scared. We all were. There was something real in her threats and we felt it. Elia and I talked a long time. She told us we had a crazy family. I agreed. She told me I wasn't her mother. I had heard this before. I didn't deny. By that time she was the only one who could determine the person she called mother. The next day she had settled down. We talked about her concerns, including her trouble with school. I made plans to help her. She was receptive. But our conversation was made of words. Elia was pure emotion. The next week, she hardly spoke to me. That was normal. Every break-through was followed by a cold war. But she had stayed and stopped threatening for a while. The threats recurred

every few months through the next few years, whenever she was overwhelmed, and they subsided when she calmed down, felt in control of her world.

The ante was upped in the last year when she had her first serious boyfriend. Initially, he seemed innocuous. A transplant from Mississippi, he doted on her and was at least superficially polite – yes, he called me ma'am. He seemed insignificant, but for Elia no boy is insignificant. Boys are her assurance and identity. The more she attached herself to him, the more she used him as a tool for her own survival. A terrible student he worked overtime at a fast food restaurant, regularly filling in for the other employees who found themselves in jail instead of at the griddle. For a while we invited him over because it kept her close. He helped decorate the Christmas tree. He ate frequent dinners with us. Elia would go to his house, meet his relatives. His family considered her theirs. They hoped for a wedding, grandchildren. But to us he was a dead end. She likes, as she says, to live large. He was not her ticket to luxury. We began to criticize him. We limited her time with him, cut off their phone conversations. We helped her find a job at the university day care center in hopes of deflecting her desire to have a child and to help her think in larger terms about care rather than possession, about the demands of parenthood. We talked about careers that involved children and activism. I listened to and encouraged every idea she mentioned to help unwed mothers and abandoned children, even when she had no plans for or interest in carrying out the necessary work. During this time the threats to leave diminished but her plans for her own version of adulthood became

concrete. She was 17, almost free in her eyes. In our eyes she was a sophomore in high school who struggled to handle daily chores.

The détente over T.J. collapsed when he announced he was moving back to Mississippi. The weeks leading up to that announcement were fraught with fights over control and jealousy. Even Elia who judges the level of a boy's affection by his willingness to fight for her, was resistant to his control. But still, she hung on, determined to maintain the relationship. Yes, she had given him her e-mail password because she trusted him. Yes, he was angry that other boys wrote to her and professed their undying lust. But he wasn't controlling, she would argue. They were just in a bad spot. He loved her and she loved him. They would figure out a way to be together. That was the plan. My husband and I listened from our detached armchairs and ignored hints and wishes. We ignored his threats to join the army if she didn't go with him. We ignored her petulance when we wouldn't let her visit him fall break. He broke up with her because we would never like him and we would always be in their way. And at that moment her plan was simply to break up with us.

Now this turn came unexpectedly to me. On a Monday in September, following a lovely dinner out on Sunday evening, just Elia and I eating our favorite guacamole dip, she came to tell me about his statement. At once she was both angry with him and closing the door on us. For the next two weeks she barely spoke to us. Her hostility pervaded dinners, chores, even a family movie outing. At 18, she refused to walk with us from the car to the theatre, refused to speak to us about the movie or anything else. At 18 she seemed more 13 than ever. The immaturity of her

reaction combined with the reality of her age made it all the more likely she would carry out the threat she had wielded for four years. By Wednesday, spurred on by her father's normal refusal to let her stay overnight with a friend who had caused problems in the past, a friend that Elia herself had poisoned our minds to, Elia announced she was moving out, sheltered by her friend's mother. The break was clear. In our shock, we didn't scream or deny – she was 18 – but we assured her we did not want her to go. We told her she should think about the consequences. We hugged her and when we went up to the bed, we cried and hoped this was all temporary. The next morning she packed two boxes of clothes and took them with her to school to put in her friend's car. She hasn't slept in our house since.

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Elia was born in Costa Rica, the third of five children to a mother who was 16 at the time of Elia's birth. The Costa Rican government removed Elia and her brother Anthony from that home because they were neglected. Anthony was malnourished. The government placed them in a hogarcita, sheltering about a dozen children. It was a house really, with three bedrooms, a small kitchen, a swing set in the yard. Their meals consisted of cornflakes and milk. Their days included trips to the library. They lived there a year. During their time in the shelter the government looked for a home, someone to take care of them. The keeper of the shelter took photographs of Elia and Anthony smiling in front of an aluminum Christmas tree. They were cute and adoptable, "the best". Since then the Costa Rican government has prohibited U.S. adoptions but at that time, since there was no family to take them in, an

American couple was ideal. Elia was four and a half, Anthony, two and a half when they came to the U.S. with David and Liane. You see, I was not the mother who adopted them. I am Elia and Anthony's third mother. I came into the family after their second mother, Liane, died of colon cancer. Elia was 8, Anthony, 5, when David became, as Elia said, "mommy and daddy at the same time." He was overwhelmed. They all were in shock. I came to this family from my own series of deaths, my life stripped of any immediate family. Ill-equipped for simplicity and independence, I hitched my life to their father David and all that came with him. We were a modern constructed family. My whimsical, ironic side imagined us a p.c. sitcom. "Hip activist lawyer with a braid and two kids from Costa Rica, marries widowed college teacher, known for mothering thousands of needy college students. Helped out by their lesbian housekeeper, kept company by their dog and three cats, the Brown-Davis-Klayders offer crazy exploits of American family life." By that point the children had lost all Costa Rican identification except appearance. They were American children glued to television and video games. They wanted every accoutrement of American life, but mostly they wanted to fit in, to appear normal in their daily world. I didn't help their need for normalcy except to function in the space set aside for mothers and to bumble my way through conventional motherly behaviors. At times we relished our idiosyncratic names and backgrounds. Explaining ourselves italicized us, gave us celebrity in town, at airports, in foreign cities. My own grieving from the deaths that had marked the previous three years of my life intensified my hunger for something cohesive and alive. It is easy now to

wax nostalgic about magnet ball soccer and school music programs based on songs like “Wacky Weather,” complete with yellow rainwear. At forty-seven I joined thirty-something mothers to applaud our children. I was so busy celebrating my own late entry into family life that I imagined my fantasies to be true. I think we all did. That is why the aberrations were so hard. My own emotional reactions to our life have changed over the years. After months of tiptoeing as an intruder must, I fell into rages when Elia or Anthony misbehaved, unable to read the severity of their behavior. Anthony was the child people often worried about. Angry, volatile, intense, he kicked doors and threw toy cars. Yet, he was also the first to cry, to hug, and to miss me when I went away for a weekend or a week. His emotions helped him to love and hate and attach. Observers considered Elia, the caretaker, the sweet, small girl who had to work hard and did, who needed people’s protection. She was the girl who couldn’t read until she was 10 because no one had the heart to criticize her. She crushed easily. No one wanted to stir up her sense of deficiency. But she did know how to read everyone’s sympathy and attention. And she knew that attention came easier in chaos. On days that household life became calm, Elia would be the one who changed the atmosphere in unexpected ways. She lied often, coaxing us to question the school about students who had offended her. Her lies were momentary reactions that hung on nothing but her own need either to get out of trouble or to make trouble for anyone who made her feel insecure. Once after a fall back-to-school shopping trip, she secretly gave away everything we bought to a friend at school. Piece by piece she packed jeans, sweatshirts, t-shirts, coats, socks into her backpack and gave



the to Sheila, because “she wanted them.” Elia became upset at our frustration, never sensing that Sheila had made unreasonable demands or that she had any choice but to accept them. She continued to give her things away for years, ultimately creating stories to account for their disappearances, often accusing her least favorite friend or her brother of stealing the missing object. Our reactions went from shock to anger to acceptance. The more it happened, the less we reacted. Sometimes I justify the change by saying I choose my battles. In truth, I stopped having anything to say. I was just unable to react.

As the years went on I became more and more the mother to both of the children, certainly living with them longer than their first two mothers and witnessing more of who they were becoming. The first mother had balanced her own fragile life with the care of five children. Liane, after a long struggle to bring two children to the United States, based on her own deep desire for motherhood, battled cancer for the last full year of her life. I came into the family damaged from my own loss, afraid of the demands of motherhood. I worked long hours, traveled regularly and maintained an independence that is for the good or bad of it inherent in me. But I became attached despite my fears and am the mother who feels Elia’s absence. I’m the one who takes her phone calls almost daily to tell me of her latest experience on her own. I still do not know what to say but I listen. I listened when the mother who lured her away from us kicked her out. I listened to the mother tell me how Elia had stolen her car and was sleeping with men all over town. I listened when this mother told me she was a Christian and would not let someone who lived in sin also live in her house.

Then I listened as Elia called me from her new house, a trailer in Ottawa, Kansas, twenty miles away. She wanted to introduce me to her new love, Colby, another 18 year-old, with a seventeen-month old child. They were watching a Kansas City Chiefs game and she was happy. She had met him through a chain of friends on the internet. “Maybe we could get together for dinner,” she said. Maybe we could have Mexican food. Maybe you and Dad and Anthony could come down here and we could get together.” Less than a month after leaving us, she had created a new life.

So we went to Ottawa one Sunday evening to bridge this unbearable gap. We met at a Mexican restaurant on the main street of the town. Between that first phone call from Ottawa and this particular Sunday evening, Elia had quit her junior year of high school and fully moved into the trailer with Colby. The dinner conversation seems vague in my memory. Anthony, sixteen, walked the thin line between his sister and us, afraid of losing all of us. Mostly he was quiet. Elia and I shared our usual guacamole. Eating absorbed the silence. I was still in shock over the background check David had run on Colby. He had a record, he was a high school dropout, and my daughter, who had known him for, as far as I could tell, two weeks, had decided she was going to be with him “forever.” I had no idea what to say to her. Nothing in my aspirations for my children, my fantasy about picking up the pieces of disaster and giving them a good life included this.

But still her life with Colby continues and I fumble for a means to render it real. She lives with a dropout, a thief, a sex offender. At sixteen he had sex with a thirteen year old and they had a child. And now my daughter has that child and takes

care if him. She and Colby make plans, they get jobs and lose them, they intend to go to school if someone can take care of the baby. She is happy, she says, when they don't fight..

I should have imagined this life. She threatened to move out dozens of times. But I didn't believe her. I teach at a university, a whole other world and I assumed she would want to finish high school and go to college and earn a living because that's what I'm used to. But, no, she moved out because she was overwhelmed by the world we live in. She wanted a life that she could comprehend, a life that for me is incomprehensible.

I feel like I should have imprinted her with ambition or intellectual curiosity or something that I recognize from my own day to day experience. But I don't have a clue how to help her live this life, this life that has nothing to do with me, even when I try to understand it. I don't know if she wants it or is stuck with it. I'm just reading my own mind and that is nothing like hers, I have finally figured out.

So here I am, a middle-aged woman who has spent her whole life believing in possibility but I cannot attach possibility to the choices my own daughter has made. She still calls most days and we talk. She e-mails what she has trouble saying. It snowed recently. She sent me pictures of the three of them making a snowman. The pictures seem normal. In the e-mail she asked for a new computer, just one we might not be using. They are short on cash. She and Colby are engaged now. She wants a big wedding, a nice reception. I avoid answering her requests. "Finish school," I say. "Get to know this boy and his child before you make anything permanent." I never

refuse her completely, grasping the thin thread that holds her to me, that connects her world to mine. I don't even hope to understand.

My daughter is pregnant now. On purpose. She wanted one of her own. She is taking classes, going to the clinic every two weeks. She quotes the doctor about everything. She has trouble breathing, she says, because the baby is using most of her lungs – according to the doctor. She must eat a lot. She must rest. She cannot pick up Ryan, her boyfriend's son, because it would strain her. She might lose the baby. At her birthday dinner, to celebrate her nineteen years, she tells us names they might give the baby. They don't know "its sex" yet, but soon. They want to know. Ryan's family is making bets. His sister wants them to have a boy. Right now she has the only girl. Elia says she is afraid of competition. If it's a boy, the middle name will be Marquese. Not the first name because Colby's family couldn't pronounce it. But the middle name because it sounds kind of Hispanic. "They think this baby's going to be white," she says, laughing but not. Colby interrupts. "It might be sort of white." "Not like Ryan," she insists, her own skin a smooth mocha. "I want it to look like me."

A few days later, I take her shopping. She has outgrown her t-shirts and shorts. She is already big for 14 weeks, her stomach protruding languidly. She is short, only 4'9", no place for a baby. And she enjoys eating for two. She begins to raid the racks of maternity clothes, barely looking at what she removes. "You don't need that many things," I say. You will get tired of them. You will outgrow these

clothes too and need different ones.. She gives in, acknowledging that she can't get the kind of clothes she really likes now, the kind that cling to her and make her feel sexy. Still, as we search for sizes, she tells me about a man who looks at her breasts, stares at her. I can't tell if she is pleased or offended. We gather two armloads of large, ballooning shirts and knit shorts to take to the dressing room. Even some of these are too small. We find enough, so that she can have clean clothes that sort of fit, that don't overwhelm her short stature. While she changes, she talks. Colby is wandering the store with Ryan. He is usually with us, in the room, on the phone, in the midst of our conversation. "His family want us to get married before the baby comes," she says, without excitement. "They think it's right to get married. They're religious." "What do you think?" I say. She shrugs. "I don't know. I wanted a wedding." "Yeah," I said. "I don't know about the getting married. But you have to think about this baby, what you are going to do with it, how you are going to take care of it." I cut short my lecture. "I'm going to keep it," she says. "I know." I said. "But it won't be easy." She tried on more clothes.

We meet Colby and Ryan in the baby clothes section. Colby has some baby clothes picked out. "Aren't they cute?" He and Elia play with the tiny suits and shoes. "Just Elia, today," I say. "We'll go to lunch." I spend the next hour at McDonald's with Elia, Colby and Ryan. At two, Ryan still barely talks. He stands on the booth and eats french fries, waves his arms, jumps occasionally until Colby yells. Elia and Colby tell me about their plans, how he'll soon have a job at a hamburger place, how she'll study for the G.E.D. when Ryan is sleeping, when she

gets over being so tired, when she can breathe better. “We’re going to get jobs and get our own place in January,” she says, “after the baby comes.” This is not a new story. This is the story she tells at every meal we share. As she sits there, handing Ryan french fries, eating her own chicken sandwich with extra mayo, I can tell she made this story up just for me. It is my story. I’m sure Colby’s mom has a different story, her brother another, her friends yet another. Maybe one of her stories is that she wants to be pregnant, living in her future father-in-law’s trailer, with two kids and an unemployed spouse on probation. Maybe she has a better audience for that story than me.

#### Pura Vida

It is January and I am in my room at Ave Del Paraíso in San Jose, Costa Rica. We have just returned from the cloud forest at Monteverde, two days, immersed in lush green growth. My clothes still smell of the earth and air. I am growing comfortable in this space, warmer within myself. I have brought students to this country, hoping that I can learn with them. As I begin to unpack, my cell phone rings. Elia has had the baby, a boy, named Justin Lee – Marquese was too Hispanic. He is small but fine. Elia had a rough labor but is all right as well. They had called David to keep him informed during the day. Tonight he and Anthony are going to the hospital to see them.

Again, I am distant, ironically, in the city of her birth. I do not wish I were there, would not know how to react. I should find something miraculous in the birth of a child, a conciliation of hope, but I just feel sad, disconnected, incapable of feeling the joy I know other mothers and grandmothers experience. I doubt my own ability to feel. The warmth I had absorbed from the forest has gone and I sit numbly in my tile-floored room. The sounds of the city street cancel out the birds in the garden outside my window.

When David and Anthony get to the hospital they call. I talk to Elia. She seems tired, happy. She is in the moment of accomplishment. She loves her child. She believes in possibility. David is caught up in the moment as well, loving his daughter, taking photos of his son holding Justin. He sends me e-mails of the photos. Everyone is smiling as they look at the tiny baby.

Over the next two days, I talk to David and Elia, get more pictures of Justin. I tell a few students, the ones who know about Elia's life. They say congratulations but know it's not how I wanted things to be, not how I wanted her life to go. But the pictures challenge my cold certainty. I try hard to accept, understand her life as she understands it.

We leave San Jose again for Manuel Antonio, a beautiful national park on the Pacific coast. A long, circuitous mountain ride exhausts us and we arrive at the Hotel

California, our rooms dispersed, reconfigured to accommodate a half dozen rock bands who have come Quepos, the nearest town, for a concert the following weekend. The students are enlivened. I am overtaken by my role as director. I complain as I sip the requisite welcome cocktail. I take a second glass to calm my tension. I know even then that the tension has little to do with the mix-up in rooms, my own room being moved out of the main building, my walls cracked and dirty. Again, I unpack and the phone rings. It is Elia. She and Colby are waiting for an ambulance. Justin cannot breathe. His lungs are underdeveloped. He doesn't nurse. He has lost two pounds in three days. He is jaundiced. They have gone to the emergency room in Ottawa. "He just didn't seem right," Elia said. He must be transported to Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City. Elia is scared, I think. She seems to understand the situation. She just wanted me to know. I spend the next hour talking to her, to David, orchestrating from afar. I can do that from my dark, separated room. I am honestly frightened for Elia, for her small son. They spend three days at the hospital in Kansas City. The nurses find room for Elia and Colby to stay too. Colby's mother cares for Ryan as they learn to parent this baby son. Elia does her magic, the magic that warms everyone to her. She likes to be taken care of and the nurses help her take on parenting as they take care of her. Justin grows, learns to breathe. Elia learns to nurse him so he will eat, change his diapers, watch for the signs of health or disease. They go home to make their life.



I arrive home from Costa Rica with a bad cold. I wait a few days to visit Elia and the baby, my health an excuse for my anxiety. I go to their trailer for the first time. We had seen Elia at our house, at neutral restaurants, but never at the trailer. She had cleaned it, vacuumed the mottled pile carpet. I look around and remember trailers before, ones belonging to my cousin Walter, to friends of my mother, friends she met at the After Five Club, other women who sought security in men. The knot in my stomach is an old knot, come from fear of my own past as well as Elia's future. I had spent my life running from trailers and dependent women, dressing myself up in education and nice clothes. Now I visit my daughter who has run toward this space to find comfort. She is alone with Ryan and Justin, seeming to manage the balance of her life. It is tiring, she says. Colby is working part-time at a diner. For a while I look at Justin, inspect his face, his tiny hands. Finally I pick him up, hold him on my lap. I still feel like an outsider, someone who is visiting my past, not my daughter and her new son. Elia takes photos. As I look back at the photos, I cannot tell from my expression that I had such mixed feelings. I am glad. Elia and I talk about how things are going. She tells me she will get a job when Justin is old enough. And Colby will be getting his G.E.D. soon. They will buy the trailer from his father or get an apartment of their own. They have plans. For the next few months the plans seem possible. Elia seems calmer. She understands the life she is living. It is real, basic. We begin to believe in her. We meet them often for dinners, sometimes in Lawrence, sometimes in Ottawa. Elia seems almost magical with the kids. Ryan is talking, dancing, playing. Justin is healthy. When people ask how she is, I say, "okay." I use

the line, “She is in a life she understands.” People remark about my acceptance. I believe what I say about her and talk to her more easily about how she spends her time. I stop lecturing, reminding, interrogating. She begins working at Wendy’s, happy to meet new friends. It taxes her to keep track of orders. She feels a sense of accomplishment. She and Colby share child care, work around each other’s schedules. They worry about money and care about their futures. We become hopeful, less guarded

It is May and the phone rings again, this time for David. Elia wants to leave, wants to take Justin and run. Colby gets so angry. She gets angry, too. David asks questions, part dad, part lawyer. After a while it is hard to tell the truth in what she says. She tells different stories. She has done that before. A week later we meet for dinner. Elia and Colby have reconciled. They have given Ryan a Mohawk and dyed his hair red. Elia has several new piercings. She is different, an old self we saw often before she left home, looking for something or someone better, hungry for attention. The previously funny, observant mother is now uncomfortable with the kids. They cry when she tries to comfort them. There is an edge in her being.

Another phone call. David and Anthony are on their way home from New York. Elia is crying. She has called the police and they have arrested Colby. I am not warm or supportive. Her excess emotion freezes mine. I ask lots of questions. “Did he hit you?” She hesitates, gives me different answers. They “hit each other,”

she finally says. “But I didn’t mean for them to take him. I just wanted to go to Wal-Mart.” He was mad because she was late, sometimes she says ten minutes, sometimes forty minutes. I do not know what to believe, how to react. I do not trust Colby. I also do not trust her. “How are the kids?” I keep asking. She gets mad. I am not giving her what she needs. She is right. I want information. That’s not what she needs. She wants love, solace. I withhold both. Still, we talk off and on through the evening. We both apologize for how we are. She goes to the jail trying to get him out. The police won’t listen. She writes a note to convince them that she didn’t mean it when she called. He stays in jail. There is a court date in two weeks. Colby has been issued a “no contact” order. She can’t talk to him. She doesn’t understand. “They wouldn’t let us just calm down like we usually do,” she complained.

Late one night, Elia calls. David and I are sitting at the kitchen table, talking through our day. She wants to let us know how things are going. Colby is out of jail. They are still under orders from the court, and now must attend anger management sessions. Colby has been diagnosed with Intermittent Explosive Disorder. Elia has a borderline personality. The professionals have clarified and named their dysfunctions. They go to therapy together, “because Colby does better” when Elia is with him. She tells me that Colby is close to getting his G.E.D., only a few more tests. He wants me to know. The kids are fine. Her hours were cut at work. Her boss doesn’t understand about the court dates, the therapy, the lack of daycare. She has applied at Sonic. “I can make better money as a car hop. But Colby will be

jealous.” She laughs. All I can say, is, “Be careful, take care of yourself, your kids.”

She says she will and we are done. “I love you,” I say. She says she loves me too.

### *Semper Fi*

Today the Queen Elizabeth II visited New York for the last time, on its way to become a floating hotel in Dubai. The forty-year-old QEII was an icon of sailing ships synonymous with an age of caviar and elegance. I saw the QEII once, not as a passenger but as an observer from behind, from my middle-class cruise ship as we waited for her to make her way through the locks of the Panama Canal. All elegance and superiority gave way to the power of engineering as machines and dock hands manipulated the water levels, guiding the giant vessel through the waterway. Going through the locks is made all the more interesting by watching another ship make its way up and over the series of steps ahead of you. I watched with my eight-year-old son. I was drawn to the historic, glamorous cruise ship ahead of us. He, on the other hand, cared little for the ship. His eyes were on the men opening and closing valves, the rise of the water as it magically levitated each vessel. Leaning out from the prow of our ship, he waved at the Panamanian and American workers in their last year of sharing the responsibility. “Hola,” he called out, proud of his Spanish words, relating more to the Panamanians than to anyone who wandered our homogenized ship.

This adventure in the Panama Canal is a vivid memory for me. I am not an adventurous mother in the traditional sense. I am reluctant to risk life and limb, content to meander up and down hillsides or parkways with my golden retriever. More often even, I am tucked into my study reading or busy in my office at work talking to students. My sense of adventure is more mental than physical. I will

entertain new ideas with boldness, knowing that the ones in my head are never fixed, morphing daily into new conceptions.

But I am not adventurous in my son's terms. Despite a jam-packed trip to London with me and fifteen of my students when he was eleven, he would relegate my physical prowess to fast-walking. I have a friend who bicycled across the country with her children, other friends who ski and scuba dive and rock-climb with their adolescents. I will never be one of those mothers. And my son will never be the kid who curls up with a good book on a rainy afternoon. He is a doer. He longs for constant company and activity, even at eighteen. A guitar bought action for a while; still, he moved through music quickly and impatiently. Music gave way to bicycling, running, driving. Now he wants a motorcycle more than anything in the world.

When he was a child, I had to grab the very few opportunities available that allowed neither of us to humor the other, that enabled us actually to engage in the same activity. One of those occasions occurred at the Panama Canal. We were on a cruise funded by my husband's mother-in-law, the mother, that is, of his deceased wife. These cruises enabled us to meld families. I, a widow, with no children of my own, merged with David, his Costa Rican children and his past family. The cruise via the Panama Canal was our third together and I was fully ensconced in the mother role, even if the role was complicated by our situation and our different temperaments. As an adoptive mother, I never know how to evaluate "normal" interaction. Either commitment to pragmatism or exhaustion from confrontation causes me to forge ahead or resign myself to the reality that my own parenting

situation is difficult. On this one day off the coast of Panama, I had a moment of bonding that allowed me to forget the complications and explore a new experience with my son.

The ship's whistle blew as we were about to enter the canal. Anthony was with his sister at one of the many swimming pools on our ship. We had made arrangements to meet in the Lido café when we were ready to enter the canal. As usual, Anthony was late, intent on continuing swimming simply because he was already swimming. After a time I made the rounds of pools, finding him deep in splash wars with his sister. Once I got his attention, he was eager to move on to see the canal. He has always loved to take things apart, to inspect the innards of machinery. Sometimes I have thought it was simply because he broke things so frequently. There was always a ready supply of broken phones, lamps, toys to inspect. But, in truth, he has a fascination with the mechanics of the world, and he wanted to see the ship go through the canal, more specifically how it went through the series of locks.

By the time we reached the front of the ship (David and Elia chose to watch from the crow's nest with his mother-in-law), there wasn't an open space available along the front rail. Yanking Anthony along, I tried to nudge in between the dozens of middle-aged and older men with giant cameras, but no one seemed willing to lose the front-row view. As I wavered between joining David upstairs and pushing some more to force a space, I noticed a "forbidden" section right at the prow. Three signs announced it as off-limits. The space was about a four-foot square with a short pole

thrusting up at the very point of the ship. Nylon webbing enclosed the space. I looked around to see if anyone was watching or guarding, but everyone else in the area seemed focused on the lock ahead, on the ship that seemed much too large to get through the tiny space. I grabbed Anthony and pushed him through the ropes, immediately crawling under the ropes myself. He climbed to the front of the prow, using the post and webbing as stabilizers. We leaned forward and saw the QEII right ahead of us. At that point, I was surprised to hear the men with cameras all cheering at our boldness to enter our taboo space. The men on the sides of the canal waved wildly and no one came to remove us from our opportune spot. We spent the next two hours watching and experiencing the passage into Gatun Lake from the very front of the ship. Anthony was rapt. Usually unable to focus on anything for more than five minutes, he watched each step, first when the ship ahead went through, and then when we did. He waved at the workers, talked to the men around us, and asked dozens of questions, most of which I could not answer. The other passengers often offered their own information. Finally our ship, raised to its uppermost level, ready to head toward the Pacific, we floated into the giant lake, dotted with the tops of trees for miles around, seeming more fishing boat than ship. Anthony grew restless with the lack of action and squiggled down from the pole. Before he left to find his sister, to continue the pool activities, he squeezed me hard around the waist, a gesture that always keeps me anchored to this boy/man who above all else desires contact.

The Panama Canal seems far away in time and place. Anthony more regularly breaks my heart than seeks me out for adventures. He is eighteen, hardened, often



angry. His sister left home, abandoned him, in his mind. He doesn't approve of her choices even as he makes equally questionable choices sometimes out of spite at her or us. Sometimes he is wise and loving. Sometimes I cannot be in the same room with him, the intensity is so strong, so hostile. Known for my ability to read people in a moment, I can rarely read him precisely. He prides himself on his ability to confuse people. I have trained him to be enigmatic. I usually know when he is angry, when he is joking, when he is sad. But I rarely know why. And, more important, I rarely know how to match my reaction to his needs. Every day I go through the cycle of ineptitude.

He knocks on the door, loud knocks, intrusive knocks, knocks that wake us up if we are asleep, keep me awake after he leaves, if I am reading. He knocks and yells, "I'm home," as if it is a greeting. I want him to let us know he is home, to give some reassurance. But it never is – reassuring. He comes in, flops on the bed. Sometimes he is sullen. A bad day. Someone said something racist, or he is bored. Sometimes he is tough – "A guy held a knife to my throat. It was funny." I always say, "Ah, okay?" – my own attempt to be noncommittal. I used to react. I still do inside. He probably knows. Most often he asks for something – money for lunch or a present for his girlfriend or gas for the car. Sometimes for clothes, a motorcycle, a new car. Sometimes he really wants what he asks for. Sometimes he is just testing our attention. Or he tells about the girl he used to date, who was on the pill. She is late. He asks what he should do if she is pregnant. Even in these moments, we shrug, say, "We'll see what happens." We put off the disaster until it is certain. He has a

different girlfriend now, the old one, the one he loves. She provides less drama, fewer disaster scenarios in our bedroom. Whatever the occasion, he always talks late at night, pushes us to respond. He fiddles with the dog's ears too hard. Baites the cat. They never mind his attention. Instead, they stay beside him, let him have his will. They understand him, the boy who squeezes hard, needs their attention, offers them his. David always turns over in these moments, reads, or goes back to sleep. He forces Anthony to choose a different time and place to engage us.

I used to think these bedtime visits offered a time for intimacy, confidences. Maybe they do. Maybe he wants that, for us to understand who he is, to relate to the energy that burns in him. It is a time when we have no energy to return. So he pushes to get our attention, asks for things too urgent for us to ignore. We talk to him about timing. "Talk to us earlier, when we aren't so tired, when we can do something." But it doesn't change. Perhaps it works better for him when we are tired, when he can pretend we said yes to whatever he asks. He has used that ploy in the past, recounting the yes we never said. He thinks we are old, forgetful. I wish I were forgetful. When he leaves to go to bed, or sometimes to go out again, secretly, or so he thinks, I play his words over in my mind, feel bruised by his intensity. I realize I have shrunk into myself, hiding from his force.

At eighteen, Anthony is a senior in high school, a nonstudent, biding his time. He has transferred his commitment to the future. He is a Marine, or a pre-Marine, enlisted in a program to give him extra benefits when he goes "active" in May, after he graduates from high school, a year past any desire to be in high school. He signed

up last summer, when his father and I were in England. He called us on my cell phone to let us know. He called dozens of times to tell us about the process, his test scores, or to get his birth certificate or to find out other vital information. He wanted to do it while we were gone but sought to maintain contact in a way that he could control. He imagines himself grown, independent, despite his dependent circumstances. The Marines have given him a new, preferable family for the future. He likes the Marines because they are intense, exclusive. Anthony has always been intense but unfocused, a difficult combination. The Marines offer structure that demands his intensity. He treats the Corps like a club. He has Marine dog tags, bumper stickers, hats, shirts, posters. His first mail order of Marine swag bore the name Gonzales, his birth name. He showed us, assessing our reaction. “Ah, yes,” we said. He reordered new ones with his adopted name – Brown-Davis. Sometimes his Marine pals just call him Davis.

He decided almost a year ago to become a Marine. He was spiraling downward in school. We talked to counselors, teachers, friends, trying to change his course. He was hostile to us, to his girlfriend. They broke up for a while. He had three wrecks. So, when he brought up the Marines, our pacifism seemed too idealistic and futile to guide him elsewhere. He was not who we are. He doesn’t read. He plays with knives. We said, “Fine,” more quickly than he had imagined. My academic friends scolded me for “letting him do it.” “Do you understand the Marines?” they would ask. “He’s eighteen,” I would respond, a simple answer. But I was relieved in a strange way, relieved that he was interested in something,

committed in ways I had rarely seen before. In the Marines, in this practice program, he has found a home, a set of friends all focused on the same goal. He has mentors, competitions, and common language that bond them together. His sergeant calls him on his cell phone and tells him to get his “fat ass out of bed and frigging show up!” When Anthony got his ears pierced on a whim, Sarge screamed, “Dumb fuck, what the hell do you think those are?” Anthony laughed, was reassured by the clarity of his commander. These recruits and their superiors yell at each other with abandon. He runs, works out, competes with all the other pre-Marines. He usually wins, or so he says. He yells his satisfaction to us when he comes home from training. It takes him an hour or two to release the demeanor.

Anthony has always walked the tightrope between tough and tender. More direct than his sister, whose tenderness is always tinged with distance, skepticism, manipulation, all disguising her insecurities, Anthony has two modes with us: surly and needy. One minute he will be yelling his anger at how unjust we are, and the next time we see him he will squeeze us with deep affection. It is hard to decide which behavior is more intense. He says “I love you” more easily than I ever have. He also shows anger and holds it for days. When he comes back from anger, he seeks us out. Sometimes he says he is sorry. Usually, he just hugs, plops himself in a nearby chair, a physical, not a verbal, atonement.

A common question about adopted children is whether they can attach. Elia and Anthony seem poster children for attachment disorders. Removed from their

own mother at one and three, they spent a year in a shelter before they came to Kansas only to lose their adoptive mother a year and a half later. The world hardly seems safe for attachment. David is the basis of their connection to the world, particularly for Anthony. David was Anthony's caretaker from the beginning of his time in this country. They ride bikes together, fix cars, express their anger out loud. They argue more easily and more frequently than Anthony and I can. David is less afraid of losing him. My fear of losing him is, perhaps, more rooted in my detachment than his. Fear of loss in my own life helps me to understand distance I often feel from Elia and Anthony and to maintain it myself, perhaps the worst possible reaction to their behaviors. When Anthony comes into the bedroom late at night, I pull from him even when his news is good. I am afraid of losing myself in the connection.

When I think of Anthony's attraction to the Marines, I see how his need to connect is answered in an intense, masculine form. They are required to stand up for one another. It is their code. *Semper Fidelis*. For once, Anthony doesn't have to be afraid that the people he has committed to will desert him. Sometimes I'm ashamed of my easy willingness to accept his choice. I can pretend I'm a good mother who wants her son to be happy, who understands how this choice answers his needs. At least the latter part is true. But I also believe I am relinquishing some responsibility to transcend my own discomfort in connecting, to hug him with the same intensity with which he hugs me. To be faithful to him as a mother.

We have regularly discussed what he hopes to do in the Marines. Sometimes he talks about being deployed to Afghanistan, about how he needs to do lots of exciting things before he goes to basic training in case he “kicks it.” At these times, he usually wants us to help him buy a motorcycle or fund an apartment to share with his girlfriend. Often the guilt nearly draws me in. At other times he talks about becoming an M.P., a good financial choice, he assures us, or guarding embassies, serving somewhere exciting – Hawaii, Okinawa, Latin America. He is frustrated that so many Hispanics have joined the military. He thought his ethnicity and language would help him land a job in a Spanish-speaking country. Still, he seems intent on the plan and is open to the opportunities and the consequences.

I look back on that day at the Panama Canal, when neither of us doubted the other’s energy or commitment, when an eight-year-old boy joined his mother in a slightly subversive act to see a phenomenon of engineering. We were separated in space and time from our future anger and distance. We were having fun. We still both remember that day fondly. He speaks of it when we reminisce about vacations and childhood memories. The last time we discussed the experience, he talked about the workers at the canal, the men opening the valves and guiding the ships. He remembered that many of them were military. He remembered talking to them as he walked along the side of the ship to find his sister after we went through the canal. After he left, I stayed a while in our private area, leaning over the front of the ship, watching the lake ahead of us. A man, who had stood near us as we went through the canal, asked about Anthony, what he liked to do, what he wanted “to be.” “He’s

young. Who knows?" I said. The man talked about how much he enjoyed Anthony's curiosity as we went through the canal, recalled traveling with his own son years before. "What does your son do?" I asked. The man, pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, and opened it to a photo which he showed me. "He's a Marine," he said. "*Semper Fi.*"

Regardless

Three apples  
sit innocently  
on a table. A worm  
scoots into one. The only  
one a body ventures  
to eat. The one  
with the worm.  
Some Murphy's Law  
of probability or  
worm physics. Whatever.  
We eat the one  
with the worm,  
the one announcing  
life and death.  
The worm dies,  
after all, when  
we eat it. The apple  
too transformed. It is best  
not to contemplate  
the options. Just eat  
the apple. Assume  
the worm.



## And She Knew What She Was Thinking

### Front Page

She woke up one morning to find her picture directly beneath a headline that had nothing to do with her. She had her own small caption, one explaining how she had, in her spare time, organized books for the local library sale, but the picture sat precisely beneath and in the middle of the bold words: "Woman Murders Uncle." None of her uncles had died recently enough to be the subject of a murder investigation, but still she gazed at her picture underneath these words and imagined the act. Perhaps it was Uncle Howard. He was a petty, bigoted man who got pleasure out of ridiculing her college politics. Or Uncle Earl who had too many children, none of whom turned into much, as her relatives pointed out in the chain letter that carefully skirted Earl's ne'er-do-well descendants. Or even Uncle Walter who seemed nice enough on the surface, but had such a nasty wife. It would have been an act of mercy to kill Uncle Walter.

After a while she began to believe herself this killer of men. She invented uncles who would inspire more reasons to kill. Becoming some tragic Greek figure avenging the death of her brothers or the rape of her oldest daughter. This evil uncle appeared full-blown in her head, larger, more brutal, more exotic than her real uncles, more deserving of attention and death.

How did she kill this vicious man who had destroyed the lives of her loved ones? Poison? A kitchen knife? Perhaps it was an elaborate plan that had taken years to create as she drove her children to school and volunteered for the hospital auxiliary. Deep within she would seethe, plot, carefully construct death, all because of some strange misdeed committed long ago. Each time she saw him she would imagine him dead, his corpse lying there beneath her gradually aging eyes.

Again, she looked at the face in the photograph. In porous gray and black and white, she held a book, picked up from a stack beside her. The eyes averted the camera, while the mouth smiled separately, obediently, her secrets secure.

## Habit

For her, junior high was boot camp, teaching her to survive in hostile conditions. For the most part, she was invisible. She stood in groups of five or six. Each group had a queen. The groups didn't matter. The queens seemed the same to her. She listened as the queens told their stories, watched as the queens waved and wooed, shrugged their shoulders, flipped their straight, bobbed hair. Boys would lean close, follow as the queen turned and walked away. She practiced the words, the shrug, the turning, in the mirror. She practiced in the groups when boys came near. For a long time she walked away alone. She came to hate the boys for staying behind, until one day, she hated so much, a boy followed. After a while she stopped walking. They talked. Not much. Mostly they touched. They found empty spaces with empty couches and empty floors and empty benches to touch on. Once they

broke into the school on a Saturday to touch in an empty gym. They didn't last long, these two, a few weeks. After that, other boys followed, took her to empty spaces. She was never alone. She flipped her hair and had someone to go out with, or to stay in with, as was most common. This went on through high school. Many boys followed.

Still, there was no one boy, and so, she went to college. There she shrugged her shoulders again, boys still followed. But she read things about boys and girls, men and women. She read about how the men followed her so they could be in charge. How she was being used and had no life of her own, was an accessory. She became angry and stomped away, yelling slogans and carrying signs. She absorbed the words of anger and learned how to be alone. After a while she learned enough words to teach them to others. She found young queens who needed to learn. She went to meetings with other old queens who had learned how to walk alone as she had. These meetings were hard. The queens yelled and cried and challenged each other, became angry, blamed each other instead of the men. Sometimes, when the meetings were long and loud, when she was really angry, she would go to a bar. She would sit on a tall stool and sip vodka. After a long silence, she would turn to the man who sat next to her, talk, explain her anger as if he understood. He would buy her drinks. In a few hours she would leave, the man would follow her into the dark. Later in the empty space, in the midst of touching, she felt oh so much at home.

## A Little Bit of Comfort

She sunk her claws into him when she was still a kid. That's what his mother always said. Like she was some kind of cat-alien-monster. But she was just there and he was just there all the time in the neighborhood and they talked and played tag and grew up together and got comfortable. It was so hard to get comfortable with anyone, especially guys, the way they looked at her, the way her mother's boyfriends looked at her when they came to take her mother out dancing. No one knew this about her, about how she wanted to hide in a second skin, zip it up over her head so she couldn't see out even if people were looking at her. Her grandmother said she was born to be with people because she smiled and offered anyone who came by a glass of tea and did everything she was taught to do. Her favorite times weren't actually with people at all, not even with him, even though she had wanted him as long as she could remember. Her favorite times were in the living room at her grandmother's house, watching t.v., keeping track of her stories every afternoon. The stories would be there like real life, but more regular. She would cry when the bad things happened, and they happened all the time, but it wasn't the same as the night her mother left her at her grandmother's house, the night the lead singer in a traveling country-western band took her mother to live in Oklahoma City.

She could wad herself up in the big old recliner, all covered with the afghan her aunt crocheted in multi-colored yarn. Her grandmother let her eat tuna salad sandwiches there in the summer and on holidays. She even skipped school when she

could. School made her uncomfortable, forcing her to memorize things and answer right when the teacher called her name. She liked words just fine but numbers made her nervous, sitting there like ducks in a row. Some people could move them around to make sense but she couldn't. So she'd give herself a temperature by using the radiator in her corner room and her grandmother would fall for it every time, mostly because her grandmother got lonely and liked having her around for company. What could it hurt?

Still, even missing all that school, she passed and graduated and when it came time for her to start business college, she just couldn't do it, with all the numbers she was supposed to move around in the classes they required. When he came home from college, all bolder than before with a new haircut and a taste for hard liquor, he wasn't comfortable anymore, just hungry. She gave in because she didn't want to lose him. When she turned up pregnant a month later, she hadn't meant to. It was not as his mother said, "a calculation." It felt like the whole world fell down on her head and she had turned up in the middle of one of her stories in real life, but without the pretty clothes and it felt a lot worse.

His mother said she would never forgive her, but they got married anyway and he got a job putting numbers in computers, instead of going back to the school where he'd learned to be different. They never did get comfortable again, but she had the baby, a little girl, that she got to dress up and hold. She liked that except when the baby cried. Still, she got to stay at home and eat tuna salad sandwiches for lunch and

her grandmother gave her the multicolored afghan to put on her own recliner. Every morning she would work hard to get the baby washed and fed, straighten the apartment, in case his mother dropped by, and take some meat out of the freezer for supper. Finally, once she got the baby down for a nap, she'd curl up, her chin propped on her knees, a glass of iced tea next to her, and watch her stories.

### Sense

When she talked, the words came out in little boxes, all wrapped up and sealed, separate from each other. She would listen as other people's words flowed like cool water or bubbled out like seltzer. She watched as people listened or tried to listen to her tell a story or give directions. Before the first sentence, if you could call it that, tumbled off the conveyor, the audience had packed up its attention and gone away. Meanwhile, inside her head, her feelings rushed around looking for words to wear.

At one point, when she was in high school, after she had stumbled through an oral exam on what Keats meant by melancholy, a teacher had suggested elocution lessons and a good dose of confidence, presuming that her halting speech was just a matter of shyness and a need for training. No one ever could tell, and she couldn't tell them, that she wasn't shy at all, always preferring company to solitude. But words were no way to answer the distance between her heart and her head.

## Make-Up

“You should always use liner underneath the lipstick to avoid feather lips.”

When her mother made this pronouncement, she immediately went literal, imagining some burlesque queen waving boas with her teeth. Her mother was a make-up artist, or so she called herself. Actually, she was in charge of the cosmetics counter at the Downtown Rexall, which did happen to carry the largest selection of make-up in town, a full twelve lines, including Elizabeth Arden and Estee Lauder. Her mother supervised three other women, two of whom worked part-time, and went to beauty conventions to learn application techniques and seasonal palates. These conventions, sponsored by the big companies, would often be in hotels in far-away cities with real downtowns full of tall buildings and taxis. She would go along because her mother could watch her better at the hotel than through the telephone wires, ha, ha, ha. She would hang out in the lobby and eat donuts at the hospitality suite. She would watch the middle-aged women fondling packages of foundation and creams, experimenting with eye shadow shades. Her mother always preferred variations of taupe in everything, because it was classy, and shunned blue eye shadow even when it was featured in the fashion magazines.

She became an expert in reverse psychology living with her mother, learning that anything her mother wanted her to do, she didn't. She began to hate make-up, hate its smell, its feel, its fake colors. Her mother used her as a model for her training sessions, practicing for the competitions they held at the conventions. At first she had fun turning into somebody else on hot, boring afternoons, but by junior high, no

make-up in the world could turn her into what she wanted to be or out of what she was. She began to feel like her mother's confection. Sometimes frosted. Sometimes glazed. Always sort of pink. She would jerk and yank and hide until her mother threatened, "You'll know what a pancake is, ha ha ha."

Her mother, armed with rouge and sponges, would finally settle her down into a towel-covered chair in front of the the giant lighted mirror, a prize from one of the competitions. "You could be so pretty," her mother would insist. She came to hate all manner of "could-be's," the litanies of her life. "You could be so smart!" ". . . so talented!" ". . . so charming!" So much easier. Could be's were the command issued out of disappointment. Could be but aren't.

By the time she was twenty, she stopped worrying about make-up or not. By that time her mother had given up the cosmetic counter to manage the discount shoe store. Still, when a new product came out that promised to erase lines or lift sagging skin under the jaw, her mother would call her on the phone to let her know.

When her mother died, the undertaker hired a cosmetologist to ready her mother for burial. But she was left at the old house to clean out the cupboard underneath the bathroom sink, a cupboard crowded with plastic trays and zipper bags filled with anti-aging creams and all-night masks and revitalizing treatments. Some never even opened. As she sampled each and every one of the jars and tubes, she began to convince herself that her mother might still be alive if that make-up had done what it could have.



## Homecoming

She sat at the end of the couch, her cigarette propped on the edge of the ashtray, an ashtray overflowing with ashes and butts. “It’s always is like this. I don’t know why I ever think it’s going to be different. I get myself worked up to think it’s different and it never is.” She talked to the air and the empty house. At this moment she was headed toward angry. Her muscles tensed up. It was like she was sitting in the middle of a highway, one side led to angry. Muscles tight and sore, her head buzzing with words she didn’t say and never would. The other side was the slow side, toward sad, her bones throbbing and her chest caved in and hollow. She swerved between these feelings every time her son and his family came to the house, every single day-after-Christmas visit, the only ones they ever made. Couldn’t come on the holiday itself. His in-laws would be hurt. She was on the angry side now. She puffed on the cigarette, already burned to the filter. Squashed it and lit another.

They were always late. “We’ll be there at noon.” It was always three o’clock at the earliest. They had to see someone, a cousin, an old friend, a nicely decorated tree. They would stay the night. Leave the next morning. “That way we can talk late.” They would arrive, a tornado, all full of presents from the day before, electronic memory games and dolls and trucks and fake appliances. “The kids need something to do.” Underneath the rubble were three packages, a gift for each child and a joint household item for their parents, a mother’s attempt to keep her son’s marriage together. Sometimes these presents never got opened. Usually they were left behind, along with others brought in the car for something to do. Some years

they would eat a full meal at the house. She would cook his favorites, a special dessert like coconut cream pie. He would smile, eat absent-mindedly, or make phone calls. It was no longer a holiday after all. Sometimes they ordered pizza, so the kids would be happy, not authentic as they pointed out, not like they get in the city.

He would sit in the kitchen after dinner, talk about his business, the successful part. When he was quiet, she knew he was having troubles. His wife took her glass of wine to the living room, read a book, ignored the children who looked endlessly for activity, finally relying on hitting each other, arguing. Sometimes he would insist that they hug their grandmother. Sometimes they did. By nine he was tired. It took an hour to set up beds. They would have to leave early. It was a long drive.

They were gone by ten the next morning. Sometimes they ate breakfast. They had given up eggs. They still allowed donuts. She sat on the couch, stared at the boxes, the newspapers, the used paper plates. She was angry, sad, relieved. It would take her until summer to get over this, to plan again for next year. By September she would forget the road she had just traveled. She would imagine them arriving on Christmas Day. Her son would say, "Let's put up the tree!" The children would smile, help their grandmother make cookies. She would spend weeks deciding what to give them. She counted on this forgetfulness, this gift of imagination, because, now, on this couch, late on a cold December morning, she had no idea who they were and she didn't have the energy to learn.

## Duality

Sometimes she felt like a brain in a jar, not a special brain like Einstein's. Just an ordinary brain, preserved in solution, but active, collecting, absorbing stuff, all sorts of stuff, for later experiments. Surely this brain would be useful someday. All this absorbing, paying attention, because her brain did that – absorb, notice, obsess, hold onto everything. There was no order that she could tell. Just a mess of images and words and even numbers that popped up like cartoon bubbles in the middle of nothing in particular: 6,256, purple tulips, insouciance, just the word itself, no meaning. Even as she drove her nondescript car, because, it's true, she didn't care anything about the car itself, she collected what she saw or heard while some small apparatus of a body directed, maneuvered the car. This body carried the brain like a transport to work, to city parks, to the homes of relatives while she, the brain, observed.

That's what it felt like. Some separate species in a way, carrying the brain around, a kind of host. It wasn't her. This body. This blob. Not a jar really. More like styrofoam, stiff, lumpy, that appeared in the mirror. It was useful, practical. But it had needs. Needs her brain didn't like, grew angry with. Like eating and sleeping. She would be hungry and the body would eat and eat. She would get frustrated, unable to control its wants. She wanted to starve it, leave it for dead. She would punish it by not sleeping. Her brain buzzed and flitted even as the eyes grew dull and useless, the lids heavy. Still, she kept at it. 397. 8,675. Fatty! Fatty! The capital of

Mongolia is Ulan Bator. But need flooded the body so the body, this hungry, demanding lump, never relaxed, never gave way completely.

#### Apartment 4B

She dreams often of a room, sometimes monthly, this room filled with old friends, her mother's former lovers, strangers who look vaguely familiar but have no names. The room is in an apartment. That is clear. It has that feel, as if it is on an upper floor, sun angling in. She sees doors on the left and right, as if she is watching a stage, as if she is watching I Love Lucy's living room but with windows. The entrance from the hall is at an angle. People go in and out. At the back of the room, the stage, are windows, shuttered, protruding back, not a bay but broader, taking up the whole side of the room. These people, sometimes many, sometimes just two or three stand, mill around, sit on couches, plump chairs. They drink coffee or cocktails. She hears an occasional tinkle of ice. They all smoke as they sit or stand. Smoke fills the room. The time is always daytime, mid-afternoon. People arrive, interact as in a meeting, a casual meeting of acquaintances. No one is angry or cheerful. They merely talk. Each time she has the dream she tries to place it, place the faces together. They do not match any time or place. Once she recognized a friend from elementary school talking to a man she had dated years later in a different city. They did not say anything that mattered, nothing about her or any subject she understood. She is never in the dream, simply watching from the edge. Another time she tried to say something to her aunt, an aunt she hardly remembered, but the smoke got in her

way, the room became dark. She lost her bearing, forgot her words. The dream always ends when someone takes over the talking, begins to lead, as if there is business to take care of. It is never the same person. Sometimes at that point people begin to leave. Others just turn away or disappear as if they were never in the room at all.

### Walking

She had walked for as long as she could remember. Not just walking to get somewhere. She didn't really consider the mechanics of walking, just the release that came with it. Her childhood house had been structured around a circle – hall, parlor, den, kitchen, dining room, back to the hall. She used to gallop round and round that circle until she forgot where she was, spinning herself into fantasy. She would walk with her father, fast and furiously to the grocery store, to his office, anywhere, but fast, without pause. They rarely talked but they walked together, in a rhythm that overtook her.

Later, she used walking as an escape, first from her frantic mother, then from anyone who talked too much, then from herself, walking, walking, shedding whatever burdens she carried with her. She didn't care where she walked really. Sometimes she would drive to the country and walk through indecipherable forests, losing track of her destination. She thrived on the fear she felt at being lost, longed for that real fear to overcome the petty anxieties that filled her days. Sometimes she just headed out her front door, turned no direction in particular and walked until she found a place

to sit, to have a cup of coffee, some public space like a discount store or a fast food restaurant. There she would watch other people talking to each other, arguing, laughing, relieved to be separate. Then she would walk home, slower, cleaner, easier. Even in her years of living alone she would walk to escape her house. She would feel guilty about her lonely cat, the cat that ran from room to room looking for her, but still, she would walk, return to the grateful cat, finally able to fall down on the bed, to sleep.

The walking went on for years, walking beyond tired, walking to attain a rhythm. She read about walking meditation. She read rules about how to walk her way to peace. But all the rules got in the way. So she just walked knowing that if she walked enough the rhythm and the peace would come. She was a careful walker, but in the midst of the walking, she became absorbed, not just in her walking, or in her thoughts, but in what she saw. She felt as if she could leap from her body into the world she observed, into the events outside her. She lost track of herself, her body, became an itinerant eye, transportable ears. When the bus hit her, she had just entered the street. She had heard a yell, some vague but loud complaint from a woman. She turned to see the woman, waving her arms, a boy holding a skateboard, a torn sack on the sidewalk, eggs, a container of milk, jars of sauce, splattered on the ground like a cartoon accident. The boy stared straight at the woman as the woman, the woman, continued to scream.

## Unity

My brother speaks of business from an article he read, dividing men and women into hunters and gatherers, explaining management styles by our prehistoric roots. It is true that I am deep-down a gatherer, sorting, blending, arranging ideas and things interchangeably, like fruit in a bowl. But forces beyond history have taught me that I must hunt, that gathering is hunting, that meat tracked down and killed is no different from the plants I sow in the garden, that living is using and being used.

On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again

When Lear lost  
everything, he lost  
his mind too.  
Or perhaps, he lost  
his mind first. Bad  
decisions brought  
bad fortune.

Edgar too lost  
everything. Betrayed  
by his half  
brother, he lost  
Gloucester's trust. True,  
he took his privilege  
for granted. Apolitical,  
he was not savvy  
to politics. But  
feigned insanity  
brought him wisdom.  
Being young, he  
had a chance  
to use his knowledge  
after the play  
had ended.

Alone,  
like Edgar,  
I stand  
at the end  
of the last act,  
sans script,  
sans plotline,  
learning to play  
the central character  
and wondering  
if the tragedy  
belonged to Lear.



## Indisposed and Sickly Fit

It was midnight. I was alone on the shallow stoop beneath my flat on Museum Street. I sat in my own stench, having puked all over myself in the three blocks between the tube station and this temporary home. Stumbling back to the flat, I searched deep in my purse for my keys. I couldn't find them. I dumped everything from my purse onto the street, in front of a coffee shop, late customers sitting in small groups, oblivious to the activity outside the windows. Other people walked past, chatting, singing, staggering, and left me alone as I searched dizzily and frantically. I could smell my own rank self but was inconsequential to the preoccupied partiers. I both wanted and didn't want their attention. I shuffled through the contents: lipstick, receipts, wallet, cell phone – no keys. I stuffed the lot back into my purse, got sick again in the street and stumbled on a block further to the door. I knew no one else in the building. The flat sat above a camera shop and an Italian deli, both closed at this hour. There were two sets of keys, one to the downstairs door, with two locks, the other to my small flat on the first floor. I had no way to access either the hall or my flat. I got out my cell phone. The battery was low. I had forgotten to plug it in the night before. Another error in judgment. I called my colleague, an art historian, hoping she was in her nearby flat, then the emergency number of the group that helps me run the study program, and finally, my husband in Kansas – as if he could help me negotiate my dilemma from half a world away. No answer from anyone. I left messages and sat, leaned back against the door, too sick and dirty and embarrassed to go find someone, to be in anyone's presence. On the one hand, I assumed I would be

all right, that this would become a vague and uncomfortable memory. On the other hand, I was alone on a dark street in one of the largest cities in the world, in the middle of the night, sick and without immediate resources. I was, in truth, a sitting duck. And I was afraid.

Earlier in the evening I had attended a performance of *King Lear* at the Globe Theatre. *Lear*, a play that brings its audience face to face with age, death, misjudgment, and disappointment, has always been my tragedy of choice. When Lear is alone, has given up or lost everything that was relevant in his life, he still rants and perseveres, mad or not, until his moment with Cordelia, a moment which allows him to reflect, even if he is overwhelmed with regret. And Edgar, the younger man, who inherits the damage, is left to remember the losses of everyone in the cast, to look back and remember. I teach this play often, knowing that most of my younger students find more interest in Cordelia or the fool than in the foolish King who makes a bad and unnecessary decision, or in the young nobleman, who learns to be wise only through his pretense as a fool. Both as thankless child myself and now as parent of two thankless children, I have sat on both sides of the generational teeter-totter. I have felt guilt and anger on both sides. Still, by the end of the play, even on this evening when I watched the play with nearly thirty college students, I could feel the power of despair in the students' responses, the desire to think a little deeper about the conditions of humanity, the conditions of their own relationships and choices. We walked as a group back to the tube station more silent than usual, before splitting off to take our separate trains. The event was part of a study- abroad program I direct

here in London. Midway through this portion of the trip, we were to be in London for two weeks and would travel on to York and later Scotland, weaving a wandering path to the Highlands and the Isle of Skye as part of the itinerary. I direct this summer program often, as well as another program in London every spring break. For the last fifteen years I have brought college students to this island, the island I would choose as my most comfortable in normal circumstances. Yes, I choose rain, the bustling city, the rolling variant countryside, and oppressive history, over sun, blue waters, and forgetfulness. The streets of London have haunted me and ushered me into a transformative world. I come here burdened with the responsibility of students in order to be alone. Within the structure of leading young, inchoate wanderers through unfamiliar circumstances, I am able to protect something in myself, find the space to reflect on the world I normally inhabit. I think that condition is a common one in travel. Removal enables reflection. Distance creates perspective. And the needs of thirty college students are easier to separate from my own complicated life than the problems that bombard me at home. I take students most often to the same places, familiar and resonant for me, haunted by pasts much deeper and more complicated than my own. I can sink into the anonymity of history and meld my history into something larger than myself.

I sat on the stoop, waiting for someone to return my call, watching the few passers-by. The street, named for its proximity to the British Museum, is busy with tourists and shopkeepers during the day, but by evening, only the Plough and the Museum Tavern seem busy, blending locals who seep into the late tourist crowds that

stop for a pint before moving on to some restaurant rated highly in the tourist guides. I have, over the past few years, found it comforting to duck into the tavern at the end of the day, able to have a chat if I want or sit quietly with a journal or a book. By the time I reached my stoop, the tavern was long since closed and dark, and the only people walking around were people who lived in nearby flats atop other shops or groups of young people ending their evenings or heading for posh clubs that dotted neighborhoods a few blocks away. Their youth accentuated my feeling of age. I was less afraid of injury or attack in this limbo than of the feeling of oncoming age and helplessness. I was visited with a moment of foresight. A memory for later when my diminished condition would be normal. Usually hungry for the chance to be alone, I felt deserted and desolate even as I saw other people. One couple was deep in an argument about the night's final plans. In the middle of their minor battle, the woman called out to see if I was okay. I called back, "Yes," not really knowing how to respond. Unwilling to own this condition of helplessness, I just waited in discomfort and frustration. Another group of young men, whispered to each other across the street. My imagination, intensified by a slight fever, concocted a number of scenarios that disappeared as they walked around the corner into their own separate lives. For a time it rained lightly, diluting my own stench. I wished for a downpour to cleanse me but the shower was brief and useless. So I sat waiting, alone, remembering the past and anticipating my own feebleness. This was just an evening that, barring some assault from a stranger, an event that seemed ever less likely, would end with the morning and help, even if I were humiliated and embarrassed by my rank condition.

But it was that rank condition that pained me most, not the loneliness on the stoop. Old age seemed inevitable, if not now, soon, in dribs and drabs, an illness here, a broken hip there, just a gradual onslaught. Not something dramatic but something insidious. I see it every day in my regular activities. I cannot open jars. My knee catches itself when I walk down stairs. I walk stiff-legged each morning when I get out of bed. These signs don't intrude on my life very much. I'm a plate-spinner in my work, balancing multiple tasks because I like to. Usually I walk fast, talk faster, and exude more energy than most of the people I'm around. The students who travel with me often explore at a slower pace than I do. But I feel the hints as I fill my days with too much activity. I get sick on the streets of London after a busy week. My stamina is waning.

It is not old age that I really dread. It is stepping out of life, being unable to participate, to travel on the carousel. Getting off would change my vantage point, remove me from the essence of living, remove me as a necessary member of the active world. I never much liked childhood. It too seemed removed, especially in my world of hospital lobbies and front porches. But I did like looking forward and assuming that the future would last longer than the short span I remembered. The vantage point has changed and so has my sense of the future. I have taught Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* for more than twenty-five years. I first read the novel ten years before that. What I realize each time I teach that book is that I have by now been the age of every female in the novel. That might seem insignificant, a trivial observation, but Woolf calls attention to the ages and potentials of each of the

characters in the novel, marking them with cultural differences influenced by their ages. Mrs. Ramsay, the nurturing mother-figure, Woolf's "angel in the house," dies early in the novel. Her presence permeates, motivates the other characters, through the rest of the book. But Mrs. Ramsay sees her end early on, not by looking at any specific illness or malady but in the way she watches everyone else, in the way she steps outside the narrative, her own narrative, in anticipation of her end. There on that stoop, as I drew my jacket around me, smelling my own fallibility, I understood that perspective.

After a while, sitting on the stoop, I became tired of my own reflection and thought about this city I had adopted not as home but as relief from my life. This night challenged that sense of relief, forced me to look at the size and complexity of the city. The London that had made me feel so comfortable now placed demands on me by its sheer size and inconvenience. Despite the complexities of my regular life, it is made simpler by being my home and by being filled with people who would take care of me, people I would begrudgingly allow to help me through this or any other difficult time. I have been one to help those people whom I will count on in my own aging. While I imagine myself alone, I really am not. Romanticizing loneliness is a luxury of friendship.

After an hour or so my phone rang twice, and the two people who called me ultimately made arrangements with each other to bring me another set of keys. That arrangement took another hour, and my ironic sensibility forced me to imagine even more scenarios that would make their trip futile. I would end up dead or captured

from my stoop, despite the fact that the street was, by this time, completely empty. My colleague arrived with the keys, and I thanked her profusely but waved her away, still embarrassed by my disgusting condition. Once I got into the flat, I pulled off my clothes and showered for a long time, washing the smell of street and illness from my skin. I fell asleep easily, gratefully.

In the days after, I checked regularly for my keys when I left the flat, and paused each day as I unlocked the street door, remembering that night more as if it were a stage play than a reality. What I remembered most was the sense of loss I felt sitting alone and sick. While this feeling of loss was devastating, it was also familiar. It joined my time in London to the rest of my life, to the past I tried to shake off by traveling to a complicated, far-away city.

Losses are the markers in my life, and remembering those losses makes my life feel more authentic. Integrating them into my daily experience informs and enriches my present. Most of my memories of loss involve other people and remind me of their absence in my life. That night on the stoop in London, I confronted a loss of self. I was not simply remembering loss. I was experiencing it in my own being. And while it was difficult, it was also grounding, melding my past with my present. Loss resonates with me. Like Keats's melancholy, it is certain and vivid, attached to everything meaningful. Memory allows me not only the opportunity to remember what I have had in my life but also reminds me of the intense emotion I have felt in losing it. And anything worth having is worth grieving when it goes.